

Reexamining Christian Conversion Experiences:
Considering Kundalini Awakenings and Spiritual Emergencies

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Doctor of Philosophy

by
Valerie A. Regner

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ABSTRACT

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The literature on the psychology of religious conversion makes little mention of the possibility of spiritual influences on the process of transformation. Also, because many conversions coincide with periods of emotional turmoil and religious seeking, the mystical component of conversion has frequently been ascribed to intrapsychic conflict.

This dissertation offers a new model for understanding and working with Christian transformations, acknowledging the operation of a definitive spiritual force. The paradigm is informed by the Kundalini Yoga tradition of India and insights from transpersonal psychology regarding the phenomenon of spiritual emergency. These sources suggest that some nonordinary states of consciousness, viewed as aberrant by conventional psychiatry, may reflect the workings of a healing mechanism known as kundalini awakening.

To reexamine the phenomenon of Christian conversion from this perspective, a qualitative research design is used; the study is descriptive and exploratory. Firsthand accounts of four subjects are analyzed for common themes. All having experienced Christian conversions, they

understand their transformations as work of the Holy Spirit as well as kundalini awakening. The case studies are brought into critical dialogue with psychodynamic, transpersonal, and kundalini theories. An integrative model is then proposed for theory and practice.

Chapters 1, 2, and 3 present theories on the psychology of religious transformation offered by the psychodynamic school, transpersonal school, and Kundalini Yoga tradition respectively. Each theory is illuminated by a case study.

Chapter 4 introduces the phenomenon of "spiritual emergency" and addresses issues of assessment and diagnosis associated with transformational crises. A case study, presented as a teaching tool for differential diagnosis, illustrates the difficulties that may arise when symptoms of mental illness and signs of spiritual awakening occur simultaneously.

Chapter 5 offers guidelines and intervention strategies for pastoral counselors and leaders who guide those journeying through transformation and crisis.

Chapter 6 summarizes main points and assesses their value in light of contributions from previous research. Finally, Chapter 7 discusses the premises of Hindu religion and transpersonal psychology regarding the idea of a universal life force in relation to Christian theology. Particular focus is given to distinguishing between the action of the Holy Spirit and that of kundalini energy.

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PREFACE

On a Friday night in September 1973, after nine long months of seeking a meaningful relationship with a God whom I was not sure existed, I was converted to Christianity. My encounter with Christ was so powerful and life changing that I experienced a period of deep confusion regarding my own identity for many months afterward.

My heart and mind were filled with the newness of spiritual awakening and love for God, so much so that I found my attention focused almost exclusively on spiritual matters. A new energy which felt like electricity coursed through my body constantly. A struggle ensued for the next several years during which I sought to integrate the spiritual dimension of my being with the tasks of everyday living. In order to focus, I often ignored the spiritual forces which I felt pulling me into new realms of awareness.

By 1981, I had attained a level of groundedness and no longer felt overwhelmed by surges of spiritual energy. Although I still maintained a relationship with God through prayer and Bible reading, and participated in a church community, I was careful to keep any spiritual energies I felt under control. This approach served me well for years.

In 1987, I began a training program for hospital chaplaincy through Clinical Pastoral Education. I soon found that praying for my patients reactivated the spiritual energies which I had tried so carefully to keep under

control. To my amazement, some of my patients and peers informed me that they experienced electrical sensations and feelings of peace in their bodies as I prayed with them.

Those perceived energies which I had once dismissed as a by-product of a teenager's overactive imagination and strong influence of Pentecostalism were now a reality and a vehicle for healing in a totally different context. I had many questions concerning what these powerful forces were, what they meant, and how to live with them.

My prayerful searching for answers led me to explore new paths. I found experiences similar to my own in the literature from India on kundalini awakenings. Insights from transpersonal psychology on the phenomenon of spiritual emergency were also relevant. In this dissertation, I share the knowledge that I have acquired over the years since my spiritual awakening. My hope is that it will provide new perspectives and tools to the pastoral counselor who embraces those struggling through transformational crises.

For my Mother and Father

INTRODUCTION

From the time of John the Baptist and Saul of Tarsus, Christians have recognized the phenomenon of religious conversion and have embraced it as a valuable part of their tradition. The light from heaven and the voice of the Lord calling Saul to repentance have been accepted and understood by many as manifestations of God's power to transform a murderous sinner into a saint.

Religious conversions with accompanying theophanies have been witnessed throughout the centuries in the lives of such people as Augustine, George Fox, and those who turned to Christ during the Great Awakening. To this day, these "born again" experiences, with their signs and wonders, are considered normative within some Christian denominations.

The purpose of this dissertation is to present a model for understanding and working with religious conversions, recognizing the operation of a definitive spiritual force. The paradigm is informed by the Kundalini Yoga tradition of India and the insights of transpersonal psychology regarding the phenomenon of spiritual emergency.

The contributions of these two sources offer the pastoral counselor a wider lens through which to view religious transformations, especially those which are accompanied by theophanies and/or marked by crisis. These previously unexplored sources also present a view of human development which takes into account the psychological and

physical dimensions of spiritual growth. The insights from the integrative model can aid the practitioner in guiding the convert through the various stages of transformation.

Problem in Light of Previous Research

During this century, recurrent surges of interest have arisen in the academic community on the topic of sudden religious conversion experience. Overall, the literature discusses predisposing factors, possible explanations for the various manifestations (such as auditory and visual hallucinations), and the prevailing outcomes of such experiences. Researchers, with few exceptions, have given primary attention to finding pathology or instability in sudden converts as they try to explain how and why these dramatic experiences occur.

For example, the pioneer investigations of George Coe, Edwin Starbuck, and Elmer Clark during the early part of the twentieth century identified such traits as suggestibility, tendencies toward hallucinations, willingness to sacrifice intellectual comprehension, expectation, depression, fear of death, and abundance of feeling as characteristics of sudden converts.¹ Using data gathered through questionnaires, they arrived at their insights by comparing the personalities of

¹George Coe, The Spiritual Life (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1900), 139; Edwin Starbuck, The Psychology of Religion (New York: Scribner's, 1900), 364, 370; Elmer Clark, The Psychology of Religious Awakening (New York: Macmillan, 1929). Cited in John P. Kildahl, "The Personalities of Sudden Converts," Pastoral Psychology 16 (1965): 37-44.

sudden converts with those who reported more gradual religious development.

In the 1960s and 1970s, a renewed interest in the phenomenon of sudden conversion was accompanied by attempts to verify the findings of earlier researchers. Psychologist John Kildahl, for instance, found that sudden converts tended to be less intelligent and more prone to hysteria than the gradual converts he tested.² Psychologists Charles Spellman, Glen Baskett, and Donn Byrne found that sudden converts have a mean score on the Taylor Manifest Anxiety Scale similar to that of psychiatric outpatients, suggesting that they are less well-adjusted.³ Although these empirical studies demonstrate that some general trends exist to support their hypotheses, the findings are not substantial enough to be conclusive.

Psychiatrist Carl Christensen identified common variables in the situations of the sudden converts whom he interviewed, including unconscious conflicts resulting from low self-esteem, religious fundamentalism as part of the child's early environment, and distorted identity through family relationships. The subjects he interviewed, however,

²Kildahl, 41.

³Spellman, Baskett, and Byrne, "Manifest Anxiety as a Contributing Factor in Religious Conversion," in Current Perspectives in the Psychology of Religion, ed. H. Newton Malony (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 251.

were all in severe conflict and under psychiatric care.⁴

These research findings and clinical observations are questionable when inquiring psychologists and clergy try to identify a personality type which is more prone to sudden conversion experience. The phenomenon is very complex, and from a psychological point of view, one must consider all factors which influence human beings in general: genetic, developmental, social, intrapsychic, and situational. Also, more is likely to be going on than the obvious emotional and cognitive components of the transformational process. The people interviewed by Starbuck, Christensen, and others, often saw lights and visions and heard voices which told them how to find peace with themselves and their God. Many of these people felt serenity, acceptance, and love, and they experienced a new sense of purpose and a change in direction as a result of renewed relationship with their spiritual source.

Interpretations of these phenomena in psychoanalytic schools, particularly those which utilize a more deterministic model for human behavior, explain the voices and psychic presences as the unassimilated, repressed contents of the unconscious, erupting into the conscious mind of the convert who is already overwhelmed by severe emotional conflict. As a defense, the convert disowns the

⁴Carl Christensen, "Religious Conversion," Archives of General Psychiatry 9 (1963): 207-16.

information as part of the everyday functioning self, projects it outward, and attributes it to some source outside of him/herself.⁵

My contention is that projection theories provide valid insights for only a partial understanding of the mechanism and content for conversion. They are incomplete because, by focusing solely on the movements within the individual's unconscious mind, they do not take into account the vital spiritual energies operative in the transformational process. Therefore, they tend to generate counterproductive therapeutic strategies. These traditional approaches can stigmatize the convert with the label of mental illness and undermine the wisdom and healing potential of any spiritual powers at work.

Three notable exceptions to the pathology oriented theories are found in the works of William James, Anton Boisen, and Roberto Assagioli. James downplayed the notion of pathology and focused instead on the "fruits for life" which the state of conversion produced. If the fruits were

⁵Freud understood religious conversion as an attempt by the convert to resolve the Oedipal situation by submitting to the will of the father. See Sigmund Freud, "A Religious Experience," in Collected Papers, vol. 5, Miscellaneous Papers, 1888-1938 (London, Hogarth Press, 1950), 244-45. In support of Freud's theory, Leon Salzman identified repressed hatred for authority figures as the motivating force for conversion. See Salzman, "Types of Religious Conversion," Pastoral Psychology 17 (1966): 8-20. Carl Christensen understood sudden conversion as a means for conflict resolution caused by early childhood traumas. See Christensen, "Religious Conversion in Adolescence," Pastoral Psychology 16 (1965): 17-28.

good, he maintained, one ought to "idealize and venerate" the experience regardless of its origin.⁶

Boisen understood conversion as a problem solving experience which enabled one to grow in the direction of inner harmony, social competence, and attainment of universal values represented in the idea of God.⁷

Assagioli, a psychoanalyst and contemporary of Freud's, observed that the tendency in psychoanalysis to relegate the higher aspirations of humanity to the lower drives presented a liability. His view of human nature included a spiritual Self, which he identified as "the very core of the human psyche." For Assagioli, spiritual awakening was a natural and desirable part of human experience.⁸

Affirming the insights of the three theorists above, I contend that many people who sense God's presence in their lives, whether they are in emotional turmoil or not, may be having experiences that are far more complex than projections of non-egotized introjects onto the cosmos. Something vital is missing in the purely psychological

⁶William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1961), 195.

⁷Anton T. Boisen, The Exploration of the Inner World: A Study of Mental Disorder and Religious Experience (New York: Harper, 1936; reprint, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1936), viii, 53.

⁸Roberto Assagioli, Psychosynthesis: A Manual of Principles and Techniques (New York: Viking Press, 1965), 35, 37.

explanations of religious transformation. Also, these explanations themselves can be richer if understood in relation to the dynamics of spiritual energy. Two valuable unexplored sources in pastoral psychological studies of conversion are the Kundalini Yoga tradition of India and the literature written about "spiritual emergencies."

Thesis

Utilizing the time-honored knowledge and wisdom available from the Kundalini Yoga tradition of India and insights from the literature on spiritual emergencies can aid the pastoral counselor in gaining a more comprehensive picture of the dynamics involved in transformational crises, reframing them as healing experiences, and formulating treatment plans which are more effective. This is possible because striking parallels exist between the manifestations observed in sudden Christian conversion and those identified in the Indian tradition as the awakening of the kundalini.

The yoga tradition of India acknowledges that a dormant energy lies at the base of the spine known as the kundalini. When this energy is awakened, it moves upward along the spinal cord until it reaches the top of the head and the recipient experiences a mystical state of consciousness. In the cases of kundalini awakening which Lee Sannella has researched, people commonly report that they see lights and

visions and they feel ecstasy, bliss, peace, and love.⁹ These phenomena, reported by people who have experienced them in the course of spiritual disciplines (such as prayer and meditation), are described in similar words as those reported by many sudden converts.

Spiritual awakenings appear to require more complex explanations than the common associations with emotional turmoil would suggest. Many have had sudden conversions without emotional turmoil; on the other hand, many have had emotional upheavals with no spiritual manifestations or themes. Further, the idea that emotional turmoil causes spiritual awakening is far too limiting. The influence may, in fact, move both directions.

The coincidence of spiritual awakening and emotional turmoil is addressed by the literature on spiritual emergency. A spiritual emergency occurs when the rate of transformation is so rapid that the convert cannot integrate the new information and becomes overwhelmed. Contents from the unconscious pour into the conscious mind, spiritual energies course through the body, and the person experiences a shift in the perceptions of self and world that is so dramatic that the overwhelmed and fearful convert becomes disoriented and cannot function in everyday life.

Insights into the dynamics of these disruptive

⁹Lee Sannella, The Kundalini Experience: Psychosis or Transcendence? (Lower Lake, Calif: Integral Publishing, 1992), 93-108.

transformational crises are offered through descriptions of the mechanism present during kundalini awakenings. Indian mystics and transpersonal psychologists have a conceptual and pragmatic understanding of kundalini energy as the fundamental power of creation and the primary consciousness of the universe.¹⁰ When released in the human organism through prayer, meditation, or spontaneous occurrences, kundalini energy travels up the spine and activates the seven energy centers known as chakras. Its purpose is to unblock or cleanse these seven areas which carry the developmental history and life potentialities of the convert. For instance, if the fourth chakra, or heart chakra, has been closed down because of rejection and loss, the convert will have to deal with his/her fears of loving in order to embrace love now. Kundalini energy seems to touch each person in the way that is most needed to restore that person's physical, spiritual, and psychological wholeness.

This work suggests that spiritual awakening may actually awaken or initiate emotional turmoil as part of the healing process. According to transpersonal psychiatrist

¹⁰John White says that Kundalini is the "personal aspect of the universal life force" called "prana" in the yogic tradition. "This primal cosmic energy is akin, if not identical, to ch'i (Chinese), ki (Japanese), the Holy Spirit, and various other terms from cultures that identify a life force that is the source of all vital activity." See White, "What is Kundalini?," in Kundalini, Evolution and Enlightenment (New York: Paragon House, 1990), 21.

John Nelson, people who have not reached adequate levels of ego development, or those who participate in spiritual practices which are too advanced for them, may find themselves "unprepared" for the "inrush of spiritual energy."¹¹ These people will endure more discomfort than those who are emotionally grounded and stable. Imagine a person from a dysfunctional family who has endured years of emotional pain and alienation. He is shut down emotionally and his body is heavily armored to the point of numbness, but his soul longs for a sense of connectedness with self, others, and Higher Power. The impasse is met with more prayer. Spiritual energies arise and begin to pierce the chakras, while "the ego resists growth and clings to its calcified self-concept with a death grip that is broken only with explosive force."¹² This is a spiritual emergency.

Transpersonal psychotherapist Christina Grof observes that people who endure intense spiritual emergencies often have had a history of severe trauma in their lives with the tendency toward dissociation. Through dissociation, she believes, these persons with weak ego structures are familiar with the spiritual realm and open to the potent transformational energies of the Higher Self, but they do

¹¹John Nelson, Healing the Split: Integrating Spirit into Our Understanding of the Mentally Ill (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 265-66.

¹² Ibid., 406.

not have the boundaries to contain these energies.¹³

The psychoanalytic observations of sudden conversion are compatible with the kundalini/chakra model if one understands that the connection between them is correlational rather than causal. In the psychoanalytic interpretations mentioned earlier, spiritual awakenings are explained in terms of conflicting contents of the individual unconscious seeking resolution; the conflicts form the matrix for, and actually cause, the spiritual awakening.¹⁴

A very different view of causality is presented by Hindu monk and teacher Swami Rama. He says that when the kundalini energy is awakened, the contents of the unconscious are "suddenly and massively released into awareness."¹⁵ I propose that a complex interplay takes place between emotional and transformational energies to bring about spiritual awakenings. The weight given to the spiritual and emotional aspects in determining causality is specific to each individual and his/her situation.

The challenge for the pastoral counselor who works with a person struggling through a spiritual emergency is to

¹³Christina Grof, The Thirst for Wholeness: Attachment, Addiction, and the Spiritual Path (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 70.

¹⁴Christensen, "Religious Conversion," 211.

¹⁵Swami Rama, "The Awakening of Kundalini," in John White, Kundalini, Evolution, and Enlightenment (New York: Paragon House, 1990), 35. The article was written especially for Kundalini, Evolution, and Enlightenment.

recognize the symptoms of kundalini awakening, to understand the experience as having potential for healing and growth, to work with the specific issues which present themselves, and to help the client integrate the spiritual and emotional energies.

Method and Sources

To demonstrate the similarities between kundalini awakenings and conversion experiences, I will present and discuss four case studies. The firsthand accounts of T, Sister Helen, Philip, and Mineda have been selected because each of these four subjects understands his/her religious transformation both as work of the Holy Spirit and as kundalini awakening. This combination allows for an exploratory study informed by the self-conscious experience and interpretation of four religious converts.

The case study of T is the account of my own religious conversion which I committed to writing in 1987, fourteen years after its occurrence.¹⁶ The case study of Sister Helen is an account of the transformational journey of a Roman Catholic nun who shared her story with me during a three hour interview in 1988. Further interviews have been

¹⁶Utilizing parts of one's own autobiography as case material is not uncommon to the methodological approaches found in the psychology of religion. Anton Boisen, for example, explored his own inner processes and recorded them. See Boisen, Out of the Depths: An Autobiographical Study of Mental Disorder and Religious Experience (New York: Harper & Bros., 1960). William James anonymously used entries from his personal journal as case study material to illustrate the agonies of melancholia and panic. See James, 138-39.

conducted in 1997 and 1998. The case studies of Philip and Mineda have been developed from published autobiographical materials.

The methodology used in the case studies is delineated in four steps: (1) data collection as described above; (2) thematic analysis based on identifying common words, symbols, actions, and interactions within each case; (3) gathering of data into case study presentations based on this analysis; and (4) a comparison of the identified themes in the four cases.

The case studies will be brought into critical dialogue with the kundalini/chakra and psychodynamic theories. By comparison and critique, an integrative model will be proposed for theory and of practice. The intent is to complement psychoanalytic work with basic theological, philosophical, and pragmatic concepts from Kundalini Yoga and transpersonal psychologies.

The works of James Scroggs and William Douglas will be utilized to identify recurring issues in the psychology of religious conversion. The perspectives of Lewis Rambo and Earl Furgeson provide helpful frameworks for defining religious conversion. The writings of John Lofland and Norman Skonovd provide information about the various types of conversion.

The works of Carl Christensen, along with those of Helen Carlson and Leon Salzman, present common explanations

of sudden conversion from the viewpoint of psychoanalysis. The writings of Lee Sannella, John Nelson, and Bonnie Greenwell provide explanations from the perspective of kundalini awakenings.

John Nelson, Christina Grof, and Stanislav Grof, who have written extensively on the topic of spiritual emergency, provide the foundational materials for describing the phenomenon, tools for assessment, and strategies for intervention. The insights of Howard Clinebell, Emma Bragdon, and Roberto Assagioli are utilized in discussing concepts of healthy spirituality.

Scope and Limitations

The topic of religious conversion is vast and the study of the phenomenon has been approached from many different perspectives. To help organize the large amount of literature on religious conversion, Lewis Rambo has divided it into six major categories according to disciplinary focus: anthropological, sociological, historical, psychological, psychoanalytic, and theological.¹⁷ Although the insights from all of these disciplines are valuable in any given conversion experience, the scope of this dissertation is narrowed to the last three areas.

Specifically, the dissertation draws from:

- (1) published research on the topic of sudden disruptive

¹⁷Lewis R. Rambo, "Current Research on Religious Conversion," Religious Studies Review 8 (1982): 146-59.

religious conversion which utilizes traditional psychoanalytic models of psychological development, health and pathology ; (2) research on kundalini awakenings, spiritual emergencies, and chakra models of spiritual growth and psychological development; (3) strategies used by clinicians who are experienced in dealing with transformational crises; and, (4) four case studies from the United States. This focused research stands in relation to previous research, and connections are made throughout the dissertation. Further research is needed in the future to build on the basic insights of this work as well, especially research drawing upon larger, more diverse samples of people who experience conversion.

Potential Contributions

Exploration of this topic is important to the field of pastoral psychology. People in Christian churches who have spiritual awakenings and feel confused to the point of impairment in everyday functioning will be helped by information discussed here. This integrated model allows pastoral counselors to "reframe" spiritual crises and to offer a different perspective filled with hope. It also provides tools for effective alternative strategies.

This topic and approach advances the interreligious dialogue. The knowledge from the kundalini/chakra models of human nature has the potential to illumine our present understandings of mystical experiences and such Christian

practices as laying hands on people in need of healing.

Content of Chapters

Chapter 1 presents an overview of the recurring issues which are found in the literature on the psychology of religious conversion. Definitions and types of Christian conversion are discussed. The scope of the topic is then narrowed to describing mystical Christian conversion and giving an overview of the psychoanalytic literature on this topic. A case study is presented and brought into dialogue with insights from the psychoanalytic school. Conclusions from this analysis are drawn for pastoral care and counseling.

Chapter 2 presents views of spirituality from the transpersonal school of psychology and the yogic traditions. This offers an alternative view to the psychoanalytic model discussed in Chapter 1. To demonstrate how the new model works, a case study is presented and analyzed in light of transpersonal and yogic thought. Conclusions are drawn for pastoral care and counseling.

Chapter 3 continues to build on the transpersonal model of Chapter 2 by discussing insights offered by the literature on kundalini awakenings. A case study is presented and analyzed to illustrate the new material. Conclusions are drawn for pastoral care and counseling.

Chapter 4 introduces the topic of spiritual emergency, a phenomenon which can be interpreted through the

psychoanalytic theories of Chapter 1 and the transpersonal and yogic theories of Chapters 2 and 3. These insights culminate in a discussion of the possible connections which exist between spiritual awakening and mental illness. Criteria are offered for differential diagnoses.

Chapter 5 presents a general map for the journey of spiritual transformation marked by crisis and psychological upheaval. The purpose of this map is to offer assistance to the pastoral practitioner in recognizing and intervening in transformational crises. The physical, emotional, intellectual, social, and spiritual aspects of spiritual emergence are discussed. Concluding remarks and theological reflections follow in Chapters 6 and 7.

CHAPTER 1

Conversion and the Erupting Unconscious

There is a hunger within every human being for the kind of meaningfulness associated with new life, new love, new beginnings. Religious conversion offers that hope and provides that reality to millions of people.

Lewis Rambo, Understanding Religious Conversion

Introduction

The abundance of literature written during this century on the topic of religious conversion attests to its popularity among psychologists. Psychologists and clergymen James Scroggs and William Douglas observe that at least five hundred works have been published on the psychological dynamics of religious conversion alone. A survey of this literature reveals that attention has been continually focused on a particular set of issues.¹

Among the issues identified by Scroggs and Douglas are: How is conversion defined? Is conversion pathological, regressive, or a sign of emotional instability? Are persons in certain age groups or of personality types more likely than others to experience religious conversion? What roles are played by unconscious factors and forces beyond individual consciousness in conversion?²

In this chapter, each of these questions is addressed.

¹James R. Scroggs and William G. T. Douglas, "Issues in the Psychology of Religious Conversion," Journal of Religion and Health 6 (1967): 204-06.

²Ibid., 206-15.

The purpose of this chapter is to give the reader a general overview of the issues which are involved in the psychology of religious conversion and to present information on how these issues have been approached during this century.

The first part of the chapter is a review of major definitions of conversion from 1900 to the present. The works of William James, Earl Furgeson, and Lewis Rambo are utilized in the discussion. In part two, the research of John Lofland and Norman Skonovd on conversion motifs is presented to provide a schema of major types of conversion. From these various sources, a working definition of conversion is given for use in the dissertation.

In the third part of the chapter, major contributions from psychology and psychoanalysis on the topic of mystical, or sudden, conversion experiences are presented. The works of William James, Sigmund Freud, Carl Christensen, and others are utilized to discuss theoretical viewpoints. This is followed by a review of the empirical studies of John P. Kildahl, Paul Lindgren, and others.

To illuminate the material on sudden conversion, the case study of T is presented in part four. A theoretical analysis follows in part five, in which the case study material is brought into dialogue with the insights from the major contributors. Conclusions are then drawn for pastoral care and counseling.

Definitions of Conversion

The word "conversion" is taken from the Latin "conversio" which simply means "a turning around."³ The Hebrew and Greek words equated with this term in the Judeo-Christian scriptures literally mean "to turn" or "return," and denote conversion as a "radical call to reject evil and embrace a relationship with God through faith."⁴ The Greek word "metanoia," for example, means "to turn in repentance to the unity of God."⁵ The conversions of Paul of Tarsus and Augustine are examples of the sudden, dramatic, complete turnarounds which have been traditionally associated with Christianity.

At the beginning of the century, psychologist of religion Edwin Starbuck defined conversion as "sudden changes of character from evil to goodness, from sinfulness to righteousness, and from indifference to spiritual insight and activity."⁶ In his study of religious development, he

³Webster's II New Riverside University Dictionary (1984), s.v. "conversion."

⁴Lewis Rambo, Understanding Religious Conversion (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 5.

⁵A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker, 2nd rev. ed. adapted from the 5th ed. by Walter Bauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), s.v. "μετάνοια."

⁶Edwin Starbuck, The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Study of the Growth of Religious Consciousness, 4th ed. Contemporary Science Series, ed. Havelock Ellis (New York: Walter Scott Publishing, 1914), 21, 181.

distinguished between the sudden changes of conversion and "lines of religious growth not involving conversion."⁷

Writing within a few years of Starbuck, William James defined conversion as a "gradual or sudden" regenerative process during which a "self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong, inferior, and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right, superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities."⁸ James and others departed from the idea that conversions are only sudden and involuntary, or unconscious, to include the gradual, conscious step-by-step processes. Whether conversion can be gradual is an ongoing point of controversy in the literature identified by Scroggs and Douglas.⁹

Pastoral theologian Earl Furgeson, for example, sharply criticized James for "fence-straddling" on this issue and introducing an ambiguity into the definition which led to "conceptual confusion." He distinguished the psychological dynamics found in conversion from those found in normal patterns of growth, as Starbuck did. He also challenged James's presupposition that all conversions are progressive and regenerative.¹⁰ Furgeson proposed that conversion be

⁷Ibid.

⁸James, 160.

⁹Scroggs and Douglas, 206.

¹⁰Earl H. Furgeson, "The Definition of Religious Conversion," Pastoral Psychology 16 (1965): 9, 15-16.

defined as:

An abrupt, involuntary change in personality in which the subject, under the pressure of resolving internal conflict or tension, surrenders the control of his life to beliefs and sentiments previously peripheral or repressed; the change occurs suddenly at a time of crisis and is not psychologically identical with the gradual process of growth and development; the results of the change may be regenerative and progressive, partly regenerative and progressive, or regressive and degenerative.¹¹

Furgeson's definition eliminated the ambiguities found in James's definition, especially regarding questions of process (sudden or gradual) and fruits (whether conversion is always regenerative). However, Furgeson's definition raised questions in other areas: Is conversion really involuntary? Minutes before Augustine's conversion, for example, he cried out to God, "How long, O Lord?" When the answer finally came to Augustine, he gladly accepted it and was greatly relieved.

Another issue raised by Furgeson's definition is whether conflict necessarily precedes conversion. In evangelical circles, which require one to be born again, conversions occur routinely and are a requirement for church membership. Many of the new converts, who profess faith in Christ for the first time, may participate in this rite of passage without the preceding emotional conflict.

Finally, whereas James attributed the change in the convert to his/her "firmer hold upon religious realities,"

¹¹Ibid., 16.

Furgeson did not mention the religious dimension at all. The omission introduced another ambiguity into the definition of conversion. The question was raised: Must all conversions be of a religious nature? This concern has been identified by Scroggs and Douglas as the other main topic of debate in the literature regarding the definition of conversion. They observe that those who have pursued this line of inquiry were interested in promoting the idea that the processes involved in political and ideological conversions are fundamentally the same as, or very similar to, those found in religious conversion. They also note that few people, other than theological conservatives, have tried to refute this position.¹²

Lewis Rambo has addressed the confusion around the many definitions of religious conversion. He has observed that because conversion has been used "by many people in many different situations," the word has come to mean what an individual or group wants it to mean. In Understanding Religious Conversion, he used conversion to denote change in several ways: from no faith to a commitment of faith, from affiliation with one faith system to another, or from one orientation to another within the same system.¹³

¹²Scroggs and Douglas, 207. For more information about similarities between political and religious conversions, see William Sargant, Battle for the Mind: A Physiology of Conversion and Brain-Washing (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1957).

¹³Rambo, Understanding Religious Conversion, 2-3.

Rambo also used the word conversion to describe the profound inner changes that one may experience: from reliance on external religious forms to a deeper awareness and conviction of the presence of God in one's daily life; from perception of the deity as threatening and punitive to one that is loving and supportive; from seeing the world as evil to understanding that all of creation emanates from God's power and beneficence; from pursuing personal rewards to realizing that God's rule is what ultimately satisfies; and from being self-absorbed to having concerns about social justice.¹⁴

Although it is understood that conversion may involve changes in religious affiliation, this dissertation is concerned with describing and illuminating the inner changes associated with conversion. The definition of conversion utilized in this inquiry is aligned with Rambo's description of "genuine" conversion as total transformation wrought by the power of God. It is "radical, striking to the root of the human predicament. For [Rambo], that root is a vortex of vulnerability."¹⁵

Rambo believes that transformation must be "pervasive and foundational" because human nature is prone to deceit and inclined toward seeking worldly pursuits that are often "anti-God." God's intervention is necessary to free one from

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid., xii.

entrapment of the world's harmful influences.¹⁶

Rambo's assessment of the state of the human condition without God is questionable and a discussion of this topic is not within the scope of this dissertation. What is important to the line of inquiry pursued here is the necessity of God's interaction with the convert in bringing about transformation at a core level.

A working definition for conversion is as follows:

The initial reorganization of one's identity and sense of meaning which results from a shift in one's experience with the Deity or Ultimate Reality. The conversion is preceded by an incubation period which may involve mild to severe conflict. The changes begun at conversion are ongoing as the person assimilates new ideals over time.

This definition for conversion is chosen for three reasons: it attributes the changes in the convert to the power of God or Ultimate Reality; it preserves the connotation of "conversion" as changing one's mind or course of action as captured in the Greek word "metanoia"; and it also recognizes the continual changing which precedes and follows conversion. The Greek word "metamorphoomai," or transform, captures this latter meaning. Paul used this word when he said to the Romans, "Be transformed by the renewal of your minds" (Rom 12:2, RSV).

In the following section, a brief discussion of various typologies of conversion is presented as articulated by John Lofland and Norman Skonovd. Their insights are utilized to

¹⁶Ibid.

inform the reader of the many ways in which the conversion process can unfold and to pinpoint the type of conversion to be studied in this dissertation.

Conversion Motifs

Lofland and Skonovd approach the topic of religious conversion by identifying distinguishing characteristics of the various kinds of experiences. They maintain that these differences are not simply imposed by theoretical presuppositions of researchers, but rather are actual, distinctive factors found in the conversions themselves. They have identified six major conversion motifs or features which are "most memorable and orienting" to persons undergoing transformation. The motifs are: intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist, and coercive.¹⁷

In intellectual conversion, the seeker explores religious avenues through the media: television, movies, books, magazines, and similar sources which provide information to the potential convert with minimal social interaction. Beliefs are usually adopted privately before the individual decides to join a religious group.¹⁸

Mystical conversions are characterized by their suddenness and the perception by the subject that the event

¹⁷John Lofland and Norman Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs," Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 20 (1981):373.

¹⁸Ibid., 376-77.

was wrought upon him/her. Feelings of ecstasy, love, awe, or fear are reported along with manifestations of God's presence, such as visions and voices.¹⁹ The experiences of Saul of Tarsus and Augustine, as revealed in Paul's letters and Augustine's Confessions, are classic examples.

In experimental conversion, the religious seeker adopts a "show me" stance and actively explores religious options by participating in groups that interest him/her. Social pressure is low, because the group invites the potential convert to experience its theology and ritual from a "try it out" position. Conversion usually takes place over a long period of time through a cognitive reorientation which eventually leads to commitment.²⁰

The affectional motif is found in those conversions which result from an individual's bond with a member of a religious group. Although social pressure is present, it generally functions as support; this makes the religious movement attractive to the convert.²¹

Revivalist conversions occur when an individual becomes caught up in group dynamics which are highly emotional and intense. Social pressure and "contagion" are strong, and can produce guilt, fear, and joy to the extent that the individual feels compelled to adopt the belief system of the

¹⁹Ibid., 377-78.

²⁰Ibid., 378-79.

²¹Ibid., 379-80.

group.²²

Coercive conversions are relatively rare according to Lofland and Skonovd. These types of conversion have been called brainwashing, mind control, and thought reform. In these, one's environment is totally controlled until he/she accepts the ideological system.²³

The insights of Lofland and Skonovd are helpful in demonstrating the broad range of experiences and themes associated with the conversion phenomenon. No particular motif is normative, so that one may be more accurate in speaking of conversion processes. In this dissertation, the motif identified as mystical is the main point of focus.

A working definition of mystical conversion is taken from the work of Carl Christensen:

An acute hallucinatory episode occurring within the framework of religious belief and characterized by its subjective intensity, apparent suddenness of onset, brief duration, auditory and, sometimes, visual hallucinations, and an observable change in the subsequent behavior of the convert.... There is a sense of sudden understanding accompanied by a feeling of elation...[and] a feeling of change within the self....[This change is] experienced as happening to him, not by him, and [it] is associated with a sense of presence.²⁴

This definition complements and expounds the insights of Lofland and Skonovd. It also is closely aligned with James's description of the mystical range of consciousness, which he

²²Ibid., 380-81.

²³Ibid., 381-83.

²⁴Carl Christensen, "Religious Conversion," 207, 214.

says "harmonizes best with twice-bornness."²⁵

According to William James, the characteristics associated with mystical states are: (1) ineffability (the experience is difficult to capture in words); (2) noetic quality (mystical states impart knowledge of and insight into profound truths); (3) transiency (these states generally last from half an hour to two hours); and (4) passivity (the mystic perceives his/her own will in abeyance, "sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power.")²⁶

The mystical motif can be present in conversion; in fact, it is a hallmark of sudden conversion. It can also be operative during the ongoing stages of spiritual growth, or transformation, as it is called henceforth in the dissertation. In the following section, an overview of research on the topic of sudden, or mystical, conversion is presented from the viewpoints of psychology and psychoanalysis.

Psychological Models for Explaining Mystical Conversion Experiences

In this section, a general overview of the literature generated during this century on the topic of mystical, or sudden, conversion is presented. Main issues identified by James Scroggs and William Douglas regarding pathology, age

²⁵James, 331.

²⁶Ibid., 299-300.

and personality factors, and the role of the unconscious are brought into focus. The contributions of William James, Edwin Starbuck, Sigmund Freud, Carl Christensen, and others are considered.

Theoretical Perspectives

In his classic work, Varieties of Religious Experience, William James stated that the first-hand original forms of conversion experiences found in "sporadic adult cases" provided a more accurate picture of psychological dynamics than the "imitative" revivalistic ones.²⁷ James distinguished between the personality types of "once-born" individuals, who simply do not have a taste for suffering, and the "sick souls," who habitually interpret situations in a "morbid" way.²⁸ These more pessimistic types, who are prone to existential despair, are often divided selves. They seek a religious solution through conversion by which the personality is unified and the lower erring impulses are subordinated to the higher, positive, life-affirming ones.²⁹

Although James did not present an in-depth explanation of how conversion takes place, he did remark that those who have these experiences probably have a highly developed "ultra-marginal" (unconscious) life. When information from

²⁷James, 168.

²⁸Ibid., 79, 116.

²⁹Ibid., 143-59.

the unconscious erupts into consciousness, the convert believes it to be of supernatural origin.³⁰ Conversion, whether sudden or gradual, takes place when "religious ideas, previously peripheral in [one's] consciousness, now take a central place, and religious aims form the habitual centre of [one's] energy."³¹

James's writings offer a wealth of descriptive information about conversion experiences and attest to the frequency of their occurrence and the reality of their efficacy. In the cases he presented, converts commonly see lights, hear voices, or witness visions.³² James did not judge these manifestations as pathological and was not concerned about whether the conversions are truly brought about by supernatural forces. Rather, he focused on the value of what is attained; if the "fruits for life" are good, one should affirm them.³³

Other researchers documented that religious conversion most often occurs during adolescence. These studies were inherently biased, because the data collected were primarily from college students. Seward Hiltner and Carl Jung, by way of contrast, found that middle age is also a ripe time for

³⁰Ibid., 188-89, 192.

³¹Ibid., 165.

³²Ibid., 188.

³³Ibid., 195.

religious exploration and growth.³⁴ Martin Luther and John Wesley, for instance, had conversion experiences in their thirties.

In reviewing the findings from literature on sudden conversion, the developmental factor of adolescence is considered because most of the research has been done with this population. Classical theories of adolescent development, as articulated in the psychoanalytic school, have depicted this transitional period between childhood and adulthood as a time of storm and stress. Erik Erikson recognized this psychosocial stage as the developmental phase in which the young adult seeks to resolve concerns crucial to his/her identity, a time when "all samenesses and continuities relied on earlier are more or less questioned again."³⁵

Edwin Starbuck, a contemporary of James, observed that conversion during adolescence is a normal phenomenon that functions to shorten the period of storm and stress.³⁶ In Starbuck's research, he compared adolescents' experiences of gradual religious development with those of sudden conversion. Overall, he found the sudden converts to be

³⁴Seward Hiltner, "Toward a Theology of Conversion in the Light of Psychology," Pastoral Psychology 17 (1966): 35-42.

³⁵Erik Erikson, Childhood and Society (New York: W.W. Norton, 1950), 261.

³⁶Starbuck, 224.

"more suggestible, more impressionable, and... more likely to undergo mental crises."³⁷ He also said that converts "approach religion from the subjective, emotional standpoint, but at the sacrifice of an intellectual comprehension of it."³⁸

Writing in 1927, Sigmund Freud viewed conversion as a displacement of the Oedipal conflict into the religious sphere.³⁹ He related the story of a young medical student who began doubting God's existence when he saw a "sweet-faced dear old woman" being carried to a dissecting table. A "voice spoke to [his] soul" telling him to reconsider the decision he was about to make. The young man prayed for assurance, and "God made it clear to [his] soul that the Bible was his Word, that the teachings about Jesus Christ were true, and that Jesus was our only hope."⁴⁰

Freud gave an Oedipal explanation to this incident; he explained that, upon seeing the old woman, the man had longed for his mother. This feeling was immediately followed by indignation toward his father (and God in the religious sphere) for the maltreatment of the mother. To manage the hostile feelings which threatened disintegration of the ego,

³⁷Ibid., 364.

³⁸Ibid., 370.

³⁹Freud, "A Religious Experience," 245-46.

⁴⁰Ibid., 243-44.

the man submitted to the will of God the Father.⁴¹ Freud suggested that this clear experience of reenactment of the Oedipal conflict may shed light on conversion in general. He qualified, however, that every case may not be as straightforward or as easy to understand as this one.⁴²

Writing in 1966, psychiatrist Leon Salzman lent support to the Freudian hypothesis and expanded it to include hostility toward all authority figures. He understood that conversion is one way in which an adolescent can channel this hatred and resentment as he/she struggles toward independence; the convert chooses the ideal perfect father who must be loved. In this sense, conversion functions as a pseudosolution and provides temporary peace. Salzman explained that "intense devotion and irrational, prejudiced convictions in the new belief" are needed by the convert for maintaining peace.⁴³ Feelings of hatred still persist, but are now acted out in the name of religion. Such conversions are regressive and usually occur in authoritarian religions.⁴⁴

Salzman also understood that some conversions are progressive, occurring in sincere, soul-searching persons

⁴¹Ibid., 245-46.

⁴²Ibid., 246.

⁴³Leon Salzman, "Types of Religious Conversion," Pastoral Psychology 17 (1966): 20.

⁴⁴Ibid., 18.

who are attracted to belief systems with values other than those learned at home.⁴⁵ These maturational conversions are concerned with the dynamics of love and represent one's attempt to grow creatively and in solidarity with humankind.⁴⁶ Salzman maintained that to understand the dynamics of conversion, each experience must be assessed not only in terms of one's new life, but also in relation to the problems being solved and the subsequent behavior of the convert.⁴⁷

Also writing in the 1960s, psychiatrist Carl Christensen understood conversion as an attempt to reintegrate the ego. He did not distinguish between two types of conversion as Salzman did, but rather viewed all conversions as attempts to reorganize the personality. This process can be successful, partially successful, or a failure.⁴⁸ He identified common variables in the situations of sudden converts whom he interviewed, including unconscious conflicts resulting from low self-esteem, religious fundamentalism as part of the child's early environment, and distorted identity through family relationships. The subjects he interviewed, however, were

⁴⁵Ibid., 66.

⁴⁶Ibid., 12.

⁴⁷Ibid., 66.

⁴⁸Carl Christensen, "Religious Conversion in Adolescence," Pastoral Psychology 16 (1965): 25.

all in severe conflict and under psychiatric care.⁴⁹

Christensen regarded conversion as pathological because it "results from the presence of intrapsychic conflict." Although he considered adolescence an important factor in conversion, he did not think that conversion is a normal adolescent phenomenon as Starbuck had indicated.⁵⁰ Rather, he understood that the sudden convert has deep unresolved conflicts from early childhood trauma which are evoked by a particular event. This event acts as a catalyst for an acute reaction.⁵¹ His insights are discussed more fully in the case study analysis in this chapter.

Writing in 1936, Anton Boisen went directly to the heart of the matter of conversion and mental illness when he stated that "many of the more serious psychoses are essentially problem-solving experiences which are closely related to certain types of religious experiences."⁵² He explained that religion deals with questions about ultimate meaning and life values, the same issues that the mentally ill grapple with as they try to reach a more fulfilling way of life. Psychotic episodes and disruptive religious experiences are attempts at reorganization and unification

⁴⁹Christensen, "Religious Conversion," 207-16.

⁵⁰Christensen, "Religious Conversion in Adolescence," 24.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Boisen, Exploration, 53.

of the personality.⁵³

Boisen discussed the mechanism by which these experiences take place. He recognized that a person goes through a period of searching and crisis marked by inner conflict and disharmony, the discomfort becoming so severe that some solution is necessary for the sufferer. What is common to all these experiences is a profound sense of isolation, self-condemnation, and loss of self-respect.⁵⁴ When the solution appears, it erupts from the unconscious and is understood as originating from the supernatural realm. According to Boisen, the impact of this may be so "terrific" that

It may destroy the foundations of the mental organization and upset the structure upon which judgment and reasoning processes are based. We have then that bewildered state which is called "schizophrenia" or "dementia praecox." The sufferer finds himself in a strange new world in which previous experience and accepted standards of value do not apply."⁵⁵

In Boisen's assessment of causative factors preceding these breakdown/conversion episodes, he found significant correlations involving hereditary factors, unfavorable early environmental influences, and difficulties in love and work.⁵⁶ He maintained that "the primary evil in functional disorders lies in the realm of personal relationship,

⁵³Ibid., viii.

⁵⁴Ibid., 28.

⁵⁵Ibid., 30.

⁵⁶Ibid., 21-27.

particularly to that which is for most [people] represented by the idea of God."⁵⁷

The theoretical perspectives presented above represent a wide range of viewpoints. A consistent theme which runs through all of them is the idea that the convert passes through some type of crisis during which he/she tries to restore equilibrium through the values offered by religious belief. It appears that factors which contribute to these crises can be developmental (such as the storm and stress of adolescence), situational (such as Christensen's idea of a precipitating event), or characterological (such as Starbuck's idea that converts are more suggestible and prone to mental crises).

During the 1960s and 1970s, psychologists utilized standardized psychological tests to substantiate some of the observations of the above theorists concerning which personality types are more prone to sudden conversion. The following section discusses the findings of these studies.

Empirical Research

In this section, five empirical studies are presented which assess personality differences between individuals who have experienced sudden conversion and those who have undergone a more gradual religious development. Where possible, the name of the corresponding theorist is inserted after the trait being measured. The section concludes with

⁵⁷Ibid., 60.

commentary by Cedric Johnson and Newton Malony on the implications of the findings.

In 1965, John P. Kildahl administered a battery of tests to forty first-year students in a theological seminary. Half the subjects claimed to have experienced gradual religious developments; the other half reported experiences of sudden conversion. Kildahl tested for: (1) intelligence (Starbuck); (2) fear of authority figures (Freud and Salzman); (3) authoritarianism (Salzman); (4) hysteria; 5) depression (James); (6) humanitarianism (Salzman); and (7) religious conservatism (Christensen). Kildahl found significant differences between the two groups only in the intelligence scores, where the mean score for the gradual development group was higher, and in the MMPI Hysteria measures, where the sudden converts scored higher overall. For both groups, the mean intelligence scores were in the superior range, the MMPI Hysteria scores were in the normal range, and much overlapping was found between group measures.⁵⁸

In 1971, Charles Spellman, Glen Baskett, and Donn Byrne tested the hypothesis that sudden converts are prone to high levels of anxiety. This hypothesis is based on Salzman's assumption that sudden conversion is a pseudosolution for dealing with extreme disintegrating conflicts. On the Taylor Manifest Anxiety Scale (MAS), sudden converts attained

⁵⁸Kildahl, 37-44.

significantly higher scores than either regular church attenders or individuals who showed no interest in organized religion. The scores of the converts, in fact, approximated the scores of psychiatric patients, suggesting that sudden converts are "less well-adjusted."⁵⁹

In 1976, using Cattell's Sixteen Personality Factors to assess 449 young people from the secular school system and members of a Christian organization, R. W. Wilson found no significant correlation between conversion, suggestibility, and dependency (Starbuck) factors.⁶⁰ In 1977, Cedric Johnson and John Fantuzzo, in an effort to replicate the findings of Kildahl and others, again used the Sixteen Personality Factors Test. Testing earlier hypotheses that sudden converts show higher levels of neuroticism and anxiety (Salzman), are less intelligent (Starbuck), more group dependent (Starbuck), and more subdued (Starbuck), Johnson and Fantuzzo found no significant differences between the two groups.⁶¹

⁵⁹Spellman, Baskett, and Byrne, "Manifest Anxiety as a Contributing Factor in Religious Conversion," cited in Malony, 249-53.

⁶⁰R. W. Wilson, "A Social-psychological Study of Religious Experience with Special Emphasis on Christian Conversion," (Ph.D. diss., University of Florida, 1976), cited in Cedric B. Johnson and H. Newton Malony, Christian Conversion: Biblical and Psychological Perspectives (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982), 56-57.

⁶¹Cedric Johnson and John Fantuzzo, "Study of the Relationship between Conversion and Personality Factors," paper presented at the Conference of the Western Association of Christians for Psychological Studies, Concord, Calif,

Finally, in 1977, Paul Lindgren tested attenders at a four-week Christian camp for normlessness, powerlessness, isolation (using the Dean Scale for determining components of isolation), and the extent to which the subjects adhered to an evangelical Christian position (according to the Christian Discriminator Index). Subjects, 35 "uncommitted nondeciders" and 55 "first-time converts," were pre-tested at the beginning of the camp and post-tested at the end. Lindgren found no significant differences across the four groups, and no evidence of different personality types between sudden and gradual converts.⁶²

Commentary

Apart from the study by Spellman, Baskett, and Byrne, suggesting that sudden converts have higher anxiety levels, the findings of empirical research fail to support that sudden converts fall within a pathological range of functioning. Furthermore, that sudden converts conform to particular personality types, such as suggestible and dependent, has not been substantiated.

The most important ramification of these findings may not be to discount the theories variously proposed, but to underscore the dangers of making unfounded generalizations.

June 1977; cited in Johnson and Malony, 64.

⁶²Paul Lindgren, "Personality and Self Concept Variables in Religious Conversion Experiences," paper presented at the Conference of the Western Association of Christians for Psychological Studies, Concord, Calif, June 1977. Cited in Johnson and Malony, 66.

For example, Carl Christensen, who maintained that sudden conversion is pathological, based his conclusions on the situations of his patients. These individuals, all under intensive psychiatric care at the time of their interviews, reported that they had experienced mystical conversions during adolescence. It is possible that these people, who were prone to emotional crises, had sought a religious solution in their struggles. This does not mean, however, that the religious experience was caused by the crisis.

The theorist's own bias can often play a part in such unfounded generalizations. Scroggs and Douglas observe that

Psychologists whose commitment is to the Christian faith tend to view conversion as healthy, normal, and leading to maturity, while those who do not share this commitment are more likely to see conversion as regressive and pathological.⁶³

Johnson and Malony remark that theorists' biases have affected previous studies:

They have not been done from the perspective of the participant-observer, have asked wrong questions, and in a reductionist fashion have sought to explain the psychological determinants of the experience.⁶⁴

These points have merit. Researchers' biases have rendered the interpretations of some empirical studies ambiguous. For example, Spellman, Baskett, and Byrne remarked that the anxiety in sudden converts could be interpreted as lower defensiveness resulting from their

⁶³Scroggs and Douglas, 208.

⁶⁴Johnson and Malony, 69.

being freed of guilt. Although this interpretation would be desirable from a theological position, it also suggests that gradual religious development does not produce the same freedom from guilt, which from a theological point of view, would not be desirable.⁶⁵

Concerns about empirical research designs utilized for studying conversion also have been raised by Johnson and Malony. Pointing out that most of the studies cited were conducted following the conversions, they emphasize the need for distinguishing between the current personality traits of the person being studied and the state of the person at the time of the conversion event. If certain psychological states contribute to the likelihood of one's experiencing sudden conversion, tests measuring personality traits after the event may not be relevant.⁶⁶ Research designs utilizing pre/post testing are needed in future studies.

Other concerns raised by Johnson and Malony are whether the tests that have been utilized thus far are appropriate for measuring the changes begun at conversion and whether these changes are, in fact, instantaneous. The pre/post study conducted by Lindgren, for example, suggests that the changes brought about by conversion are not immediate and do not affect stable personality traits.⁶⁷ This observation

⁶⁵Spellman et al., 252.

⁶⁶Johnson and Malony, 64-65.

⁶⁷Ibid., 66-67.

coincides with Starbuck's data that old ways and habits still persist after conversion even though the convert experiences a changed "attitude toward life" which is fairly permanent and constant.⁶⁸

A survey of the general research on the psychology of religious conversion reveals that other avenues need to be explored in understanding the changes which occur during transformations and their underlying dynamics. Perhaps one may look to changes in "attitude toward life," identified by Starbuck's data as salient in conversion, as a promising direction to pursue in future studies.⁶⁹

Thus far, what is apparent is that conversion often coincides with life crises. Johnson and Malony maintain that the only sure conclusion from this observation is that "the crises contribute to the conversion experience in the sense that conversion helps the person resolve the conflict."⁷⁰ They emphasize that this interaction in no way implies that the crisis caused the conversion.

The following section proceeds with exploratory research on transformational crisis through a case study and analysis. The purpose is to identify and illuminate salient themes in one exemplary case in which emotional crisis does play a role. No assumption is made that all cases would be

⁶⁸Starbuck, 360-61.

⁶⁹Ibid., 360.

⁷⁰Johnson and Malony, 68.

the same, however. The themes are brought into critical dialogue with the prevailing theories discussed earlier. Conclusions are then drawn for pastoral care and counseling.

The following case study is autobiographical. It tells the story of my conversion to Christianity, which took place during my adolescence, a time when I searched for God in the wake of much emotional turmoil. I first recorded the details of my journey in writing in 1987 (fourteen years after their occurrence) in the form of a case study. The material remains the same.

Case Study -- Valerie (T)

T is an eighteen-year-old white female who was raised in a middle-class home. The oldest of three children, she was a disappointment to her mother at birth, for her mother had hoped for a son. T's mother had been raised in an alcoholic, abusive environment. She vented much of her own unresolved rage on her daughter as T was growing up.

When T was eight years old, her mother was diagnosed paranoid schizophrenic and hospitalized for nine months. T and her younger sister went to live with an aunt and her family. During this time, T was molested by her older cousin. Because of these incidents of losing her mother and the incest, T wrestled with doubts about God's existence and finally came to the conclusion that God was absent.

T's life was very different after that year. She was often withdrawn and depressed and felt that she could not

share any feelings with her family. Her father was diagnosed with a severe heart condition when she was eleven; T feared that sharing her emotional pain with him might cause stress which could lead to another heart attack and possible death. T also felt that she could not talk to her mother about her pain, fearing that any mention of unpleasant issues might cause her to have another nervous breakdown.

T's parents often fought verbally. They threatened to divorce many times, but decided to stay together for the children. T felt responsible for their marriage and tried to be exceptionally well-behaved. As the oldest child, she tried to be an example to her younger siblings.

The nuns and teachers at T's elementary school became very important to her. She found that being a high achiever and getting good grades allowed her to receive positive attention. Thinking that she had to be perfect to be liked, she became discouraged if she made any mistakes or failed to live up to her high expectations of herself. She worried a lot about her school performance and about being responsible and moral; this need to be "perfect" carried over into other activities, such as sports and music, as well.

T transferred to public school in the ninth grade. Although she was well liked and respected, she felt insecure about her abilities and her appearance. T became involved in sports and music at school and had a steady boyfriend. Home life was more of the same: her mother was emotionally absent

and needy and abusive; her father was physically absent and, for the most part, unavailable. When T was sixteen, her mother was hospitalized again, and T had to take care of the home and younger siblings. She became discouraged and started drinking alcohol with her friends to numb her pain.

T became more withdrawn and depressed over the next two years and continued to drink several times a week. She broke up with her boyfriend because her parents did not like him. Although she dated often, she found herself thinking about her old boyfriend and wanted to go back with him. She felt bound to her family, though, and was confused about what she should do.

At this time, T's world felt very small. She had withdrawn from school activities because of her mother's most recent hospitalization. After that, any attempts to reinvolve herself were short-lived because she felt so shameful and disconnected, as if something was really wrong with her and her family.

About three months before high school graduation, T talked to some students who were involved with the charismatic movement. They had a joy and excitement for life that she found curious, especially given the fact that these people were not part of the "in group" at school. They attributed their happiness to being "saved and spirit-filled." This gift, they claimed, came directly from God and was available to anyone who asked.

T was skeptical upon hearing this, but she decided to accept their invitation to attend a prayer meeting in the area. What she observed there seemed unbelievable. God was talking through people in strange languages and giving them loving, supportive messages to guide them in their daily lives. Even the small children were speaking in strange tongues. Others claimed that they were being healed from various ailments, including depression. What appealed to T the most, however, was the love and comradeship she sensed among the members of the group.

T wanted to believe that God existed and was ready to accept her lovingly, but she did not know how to connect with the reality of such a God. Every time she tried to believe, she thought of arguments to negate God's existence and came up with possible natural explanations for the strange phenomena she had witnessed in the churches. This wavering back and forth went on for months until it was the only thing she could think about. Her friends told her that God was calling her to salvation and she only had to believe to receive it. Perhaps she was still holding on to sin in her life. This suggestion made T withdraw more. She thought that something was really wrong with her and that God would not accept her. When she heard hellfire and damnation sermons during church services, she felt that she must surely be an object of God's wrath.

By the time T experienced conversion, she was so

depressed that she could hardly move physically; her body felt tight and numb so that she had begun to lose awareness of where it began and left off. T's vision was blurred; objects were seen as if through a cloudy tunnel and everything appeared two-dimensional. Her hearing had become so distorted that she could not even tune her guitar, something that she had been doing without any trouble for ten years. She felt that her only hope was for this faraway God to save her, an event which she thought might happen any day now. She thought about taking her own life to end the nightmare she was experiencing. Yet, at the same time, she kept thinking about this God who would give her a new meaningful life, if she could just hang on for a little while longer.

The breakthrough came one night after she had gone to a revival conducted by an itinerant preacher who claimed to have a healing ministry. After the service, she talked to him about her dilemma. He told her that the devil did not want her to worship God the way she wanted to. She found this explanation annoying; in her opinion, the people she had met so far in the charismatic movement blamed too many things on a devil instead of taking responsibility for themselves.

T also felt incredible compassion from the preacher during her conversation with him. She was aware that she needed help and allowed him to pray for her. Later that

evening while she was talking on the phone to a friend about the service, she began to experience gentle rushes throughout her body. These sensations felt like electricity and became increasingly stronger. Her voice began to quiver and she explained what was happening. Her friend told her that she was hanging out in those "weird" churches too much. T half agreed and hung up the phone so she could take a walk.

As T was leaving, her father walked in the door and she began to tell him about the healings she had witnessed at the church. Her father said that he could not believe she had fallen for such a thing. T was upset because her flicker of hope was being snuffed out again, and she left to be alone. It was then that she cried out desperately to God, "If you really exist, please show me now, or I am going to lose it." She then had the thought that if God existed and if the prayers said on her behalf had been answered, she should already have the baptism of the Holy Spirit and be able to speak in tongues. If all of this were true, she only needed to open her mouth and let it go... let it go... let it go.... As she said those words, she felt her tongue loosen and began to speak in another language. With that utterance came the realization that God loved her and cared for her, had always been close to her even though she had never known it, and would be near to her in this new way from now on.

T went to sleep that night feeling like she was on a cloud; she had never known peace or love like this before. It seemed unreal. When she awoke the next morning, T thought she had only dreamed about what had happened the night before. She prayed again. This time she knew that she was actually talking to someone: "Lord, if you show me that you exist in a real way, I'll turn my life over to you." As T finished saying those words, she sensed a presence in the room. It moved toward her and swept through her; she saw a cross in the corner of the room with fire on the top bar. T fell to her knees, then lay on the floor sobbing tears of relief and joy. This God was real!

Armed with the King James Version and filled with the newness of the Gospel, T zealously set out to convert the world, beginning with family and friends. As she was certain that Jesus was coming back at any moment to rescue the true church from the imminent world disaster (something that was proclaimed over and over in the churches she had been attending), she felt a sense of urgency and desperation in her mission to save as many as she could. T was very concerned with "saving" Catholics. She wanted to let them know that they could have direct contact with the Divinity. A local priest told her that she would never be content in the Catholic church with her new religion, and some of her friends thought she was taking drugs. T decided to keep a low profile outside the fundamentalist churches; she found

comfort in a "sola scriptural" type of mentality as she waited for the Second Coming.

Adjusting to this new life style was difficult for T in many ways. Fundamentalist doctrines were restrictive, but she accepted them without too much questioning. She felt uncomfortable and confused at times about their appraisal of human nature as inherently evil, as it seemed unfair when she thought about the struggles of her parents. Still, she went along with the "unchangeable truths" of the scriptures. She was told not to trust her feelings about matters which were contrary to what the Bible says, but rather to renew her mind with the scriptures and to trust God to work out every detail of her life.

This process eventually resulted in T seeing life in dualistic categories such as the saved vs. the lost, the spiritual person vs. the carnal person, spirit warring against flesh, and the satanic forces of evil vs. the power of the Holy Spirit in the world. She also accepted the hierarchical structures of the church as being ordained by God, which meant that she followed the directions of the preachers she heard with minimal questioning.

T's peak emotional experience lasted for months. She finally knew without a doubt that God existed and cared for her personally; this realization was very positive, and she felt hopeful and content. What had been the worst depression she had ever experienced had lifted instantaneously. The sky

was bluer; the grass was greener. T felt lighthearted and free. She shared this revelation with others, especially ones whom she recognized as being emotionally needy.

With the baptism of the Holy Spirit came overwhelming amounts of compassion and love for all beings (even animals), along with intense feelings of joy and sorrow. Three days after the conversion event, for example, T saw a lame beggar clothed in rags lying on a dirty sidewalk in the city. She began to grieve and tears streamed from her eyes. She wanted to ask him if she could lay hands on him and pray, but the "reality" that she could not walk over to a perfect stranger and voice this strange request held her back. Often, she censored urges such as this even though her other "saved" friends told her that she should act on them as they did.

T began to feel ambivalent about these strong emotions. Although it was good to be able to feel again and to care deeply for others, these feelings and impressions were too strong. Mentally, she could not handle the rush of information that went along with being "spirit-filled." She began to experience a loss of physical and emotional boundaries. Her thoughts raced. Her vision was blurred. Her hearing was impaired in that she could not accurately perceive where sounds were coming from. When she spoke about God, T had an authority and confidence that she had not known before, but her voice seemed to be coming from

somewhere outside her head. The mental tension she felt was unbearable. Her body began to "freeze up": her right arm and right leg became stiff and numb, so that she was uncoordinated, and her face became hard and expressionless. T felt trapped and scared.

What kept T from seeking professional help was that she thought that this whole experience came from God and she did not want someone to talk her out of that conviction. She also felt that if she went to a psychologist, it would mean that she was selling out on God through a lack of faith; this would be a terrible sin. In her panic, she made a painful decision. She became angry with God and took the attitude, "This is between you and me, Lord." She mentally cursed God, hoping that this terrible thing would leave her. The fear of her blasphemies made them snowball into an obsession. She felt condemned again.

T's whole being was involved in what was happening at each moment. The mental confusion was not something she could just stand back from in order to get a perspective. T had no sense of a past, which was swallowed up in the present, and no hope for a good future. Her name sounded strange to her; the name of Jesus was more real to T than her own name. She had no real grasp of an I-Thou relationship with God, because there was no "I" anymore.

God became a presence which she imagined to be right outside her body, all around her, controlling her, consuming

her. In this struggle, she not only felt isolated from other people, but was afraid of them and for them. T was convinced of the hopeless vulnerability of human nature and saw human life as meaningless. There was so much going on in her mind that she could not concentrate on anything else. She desperately tried to create a cognitive framework in which to understand what was happening to her mentally and emotionally. She wanted to die. T felt that she had already died in many ways; suicide was not an option for her, however, because her recent encounter with God had convinced her that her life was not hers to take.

The way out was long and tedious. T went through the motions of daily living as well as she could. She attended college for one semester and then began working as a trainee in an optical company. Having lost her perceptions of time and space, T became a vigilant watch observer so she would be on time for classes or work, and she moved rather slowly so she would not bump into things. Although she was preoccupied with the integration and "reality" issues which were constantly on her mind, she was able to perform well enough to pass her courses and hold the job. These activities provided some structure in the chaos; as she attended consistently to these everyday tasks, a realistic whole life perspective slowly began to take shape which included the integration of her newly acquired spiritual dimension. As her scope broadened, her life began to take on

meaning again and the chaotic features of her experience slowly faded into the background.

From the time of T's conversion, she was aware of a strong spiritual energy in her body. Sometimes this energy felt tingly like electricity; at other times, it felt like a thick peace enveloping her. T also noticed that during times of extreme mental confusion, she would sometimes hear a high pitched whistle. This sound seemed to originate from about ten feet away from her. As it moved closer, she felt a gentle presence which she called "the wall of peace." The peace would actually move through her mind, making it peaceful and clear. She interpreted the feelings of electricity, the peace, and the whistling sound as tangible signs of God's presence and support because all seemed to aid in her direct healing. To her amazement, one of her friends also heard the high pitched whistle once when T was experiencing it. For years, she had thought that she was the only one who could hear it.⁷¹

When T was converted, she experienced the scriptures as coming alive for her. She read the Bible constantly to understand her relationship with God. She learned to view most things from a literalist, conservative, fundamentalist perspective as she rebuilt her life. For instance, when she

⁷¹This paragraph is an addition to the original 1987 case study. I deliberately left out the material, initially, because I did not realize, until after reading about the kundalini energy, that the feelings of electricity and the whistling sound were symptomatic of a kundalini awakening.

"lost her memory" of her past life, she took Paul's words: "If anyone is in Christ, he/she is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold; the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17) as speaking to her situation. Another example: On the same day she encountered the lame beggar, she went into a cafeteria and ordered a blueberry muffin. When she broke the muffin, her heart leapt and she immediately thought of the Last Supper. In her "spirit," she knew that this event had really taken place two thousand years ago as the scriptures had said and she felt very close to Jesus. T remembered his words to the apostles: "the Holy Spirit... will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (John 14:26). T started to imagine the apostles sitting around her at the table in the cafeteria and prayed silently, "Lord, I can't handle this. Please make this go away." She felt trapped, afraid, and full of despair. In her confusion, she felt hopelessly dependent on this Higher Power she called the Holy Spirit and thought of Jesus' words, "Unless you turn and become like little children, you will never inherit the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:3).

In spite of the turmoil, T still believed that God was with her and would "guide her into all truth" (John 16:13). Taking her cue from Paul (who also had strange spiritual experiences, 2 Cor. 12: 1-10), she "learned, in whatever state [she was], to be content" (Phil 4:11). In other words, she stopped fighting the experience and went with it. This

process worked for her. She was able to reach high levels of stability through reading the scriptures and socializing much of her experience within the church. She was fortunate eventually to find a fairly liberal Pentecostal Assembly with a very understanding, compassionate pastor who became like a father to her. In sharing everything with him, more confusion faded away.

About three years after conversion, T began to analyze critically the presuppositions of fundamentalist theology; she eventually realized that her spirituality was not contingent upon that particular belief system and that much of what she experienced at conversion was due to the emotional stress she was under at the time. She pursued studies in theology and psychology and continued to distinguish between the psychological and spiritual aspects of her experience. Six years after her conversion, she left the Pentecostal church and began to work with a therapist.

T was able to see how her family of origin issues had impacted her life and no longer "spiritualized" her personal issues. For instance, she understood that her need to be perfect had nothing to do with a demanding God who required this, but rather with her equating achievement with self-worth. Fourteen years beyond the conversion event finds her wiser, knowing that a loving Divine Spirit has guided and supported her throughout her journey. She does not label or try to identify this Spirit as exclusive to any particular

belief system, but rather understands this "life force" as being common to all.

Theoretical Analysis

In this section, salient themes in T's case are identified and brought into critical dialogue with prevailing viewpoints on the psychology of religious conversion. Observations and impressions from authors in the psychology of religion and clinicians who have worked with sudden converts are utilized in providing a starting point for understanding what occurred in T's case. To their writings I now turn.

Two main themes in T's case are unresolved emotional pain and a longing for acceptance and meaning as represented in the idea of God. T endured years of physical and emotional abuse by her mother and did not share this pain with anyone. She felt rejected and ashamed after the incest with her cousin, and again, did not share the pain. These negative emotions colored her life experiences from an early age, and she fought many depressions.

When T was sixteen, her mother was hospitalized and T found it necessary to break up with her boyfriend. These events precipitated a depression which lasted for two years. T began to drink alcohol to deal with the pain. Months prior to her conversion, she began to ponder questions concerning the meaning of life. Her encounter with charismatic Christians in high school became a catalyst for her

searching for a relationship with God.

James and Starbuck. T's preconversion state exemplified that of the "sick soul" described by William James. T was in deep despair and could not experience life's goodness anymore. James observed that the sick soul is melancholic and has lost the sense that reality can be good.⁷² During T's depressed state, she longed for God and the abundant life promised by religion. The possibilities for the new life were modeled for her by high school friends in the charismatic movement. T wanted to experience the same peace, love, and sense of belonging that she saw operating in their lives. For nine months, T struggled against doubt as she sought a relationship with God. In James's schema, T was a "divided self" in need of "a stimulus, an excitement, a faith, a force that re-infuses the positive willingness to live."⁷³

T's preconversion period is also explicable in terms of the Starbuck model. In his research, Starbuck identified the desire to escape from sin and the quest for spiritual illumination as two distinct forms of conversion. He maintained that conversion away from sinfulness is much like breaking a bad habit, and is common in conversions in the lives of older people or of those who have pursued a wayward path. Prior to conversion, T struggled with thoughts of

⁷²James, 127.

⁷³Ibid., 159.

being sinful, such as when she drank alcohol or engaged in sexual activity; however, her main focus was on having a relationship with God. This emphasis places her in Starbuck's second group, those who are seeking spiritual illumination.⁷⁴

The quest for spiritual illumination is a frequent occurrence during adolescence, according to Starbuck:

It involves a struggle after larger life, and is largely positive, although often accompanied by uncertainty and distress. After praying, and struggling, and striving, the light dawns, new insight is attained, and there is joy and a sense of freedom in the new possession.⁷⁵

Starbuck explained that the preconversion period for one seeking spiritual illumination is marked by a strong sense of unworthiness and imperfection in which the longing for the unattained is strongly implied.⁷⁶ (This observation is akin to James's description of the "divided self.") T felt like an object of God's wrath as she struggled to reach for life on a spiritual plane.

The breakthrough to the new life finally came for T when she stopped struggling and faced God honestly and directly, committing her life to God's care. James and Starbuck both agreed that this act of self-surrender is imperative for the new life to begin. They explained that

⁷⁴Starbuck, 85.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Ibid., 87.

while unconscious forces are ripening toward spiritual awakening during the preconversion period, the personal will (which is conscious) is actually in the way of its realization. When the convert finally relaxes and gives up the struggle, he/she yields to the unconscious forces which carry the new life, making them the center of a new personality.⁷⁷

At the moment of conversion, T sensed a deep awareness of God's existence and loving care for her. She felt a joy and a peace she had not known before. Visual phenomena accompanied this experience; she saw a cross with fire on the top bar and sensed a bright light which she understood as a sign of God's presence. James explained that these changes in awareness, along with the visions and photisms (lights), are common and "must simply be ascribed to the subject's having a large subliminal region."⁷⁸ He also suggested that if higher spiritual forces do, in fact, exist, a realization of their direct contact may require that one possess such a subconscious region.⁷⁹

Psychoanalytic School. Whereas James and Starbuck focused on describing conversion events, proponents of the psychoanalytic school offered viewpoints on their underlying dynamics. For Sigmund Freud, conversion is a displacement of

⁷⁷James, 175; Starbuck, 91.

⁷⁸James, 205.

⁷⁹Ibid., 198.

the Oedipal conflict into the religious sphere. For the convert, in Freud's view, the conversion experience is a projection, in which the convert resolves the childhood conflict with a parent. Certainly, the elements of conflict are evident in T's early life. As a young child, T sensed her mother's disappointment that she was not a boy, and endured years of physical and emotional abuse by her mother, a pain exacerbated because she did not share it with anyone.

T's conversion experience can also be viewed in light of Leon Salzman's model. He distinguished between maturational and regressive conversions, the former being integrating and life-enhancing, and the latter being a pseudo-solution to solving personality disorders or personal problems.⁸⁰ T's conversion contains elements of both types. Characteristic of the regressive type, she exhibited an intensity of belief in her new faith which appeared "exaggerated and irrational," that is, the greater truths of religion were not as important as adhering to doctrinal forms.⁸¹ As a new convert, she viewed her previous belief system (Catholic) with contempt and discounted it as false. These initial negative reactions did not last, however. T eventually abandoned the authoritarian notion of religious truth and began to recognize that the laws of God were more concerned with how one loves.

⁸⁰Salzman, 13.

⁸¹Ibid., 18.

Although T's case had some elements of the regressive type, it also contained those of maturational conversion. Salzman said that this progressive type occurs in "reasonably normal" persons and enables them to achieve "self-awareness, concern for others, and [a sense of] oneness with the world."⁸² Feelings of love and compassion toward others (lame beggar) were strong as a result of T's conversion; at times, she also experienced new levels of self-awareness and feelings of harmony with God and the world. Because of the deep conflict T was in at the time of her conversion, she did not experience these positive aspects alone, although they were definitely present. The healthy universal values of salugenic religion were accompanied by feelings of destruction from the past. T had to choose between what was edifying and what was destructive as she rebuilt her personality.

The insights of Carl Christensen complement Salzman's in that they both understood that the religious belief system can support the weak ego, become a vehicle for acting out emotional conflict, and be the catalyst for the explosive reaction called conversion. Christensen, however, did not draw a distinction between regressive and progressive types of conversion. Rather, he understood all conversions as attempts to integrate the ego. For him, conversion is a "process which may be successful, partially

⁸²Ibid., 12.

successful, or a failure, but which is functioning toward reintegration."⁸³

Christensen viewed conversion as pathological in origins because it results from intrapsychic conflict. Drawing from the work of psychiatrist Helen Carlson, he understood conversion as an example of an acute confusional state. Carlson defined this adolescent phenomenon as a "transitory, self-limiting symptom-complex which occurs when the ego is overwhelmed by demands made upon it, either from external or internal sources."⁸⁴ She listed variables precipitating this condition as including an unfamiliar environment which the individual perceives as unfriendly, pressure from the outside to conform, internal movement toward self-realization, and the experience of infantile trauma.⁸⁵ Carlson diagrams the progression through the confusional state as follows:

Initial Psychological Setting ----> Frustration ---->
Rage (Disintegration of Ego Defenses) ----> Confusion ---->
Resolution of Confusion ----> Revised Psychological Setting

T's initial ego integration setting, her family of origin, did not provide her with the nurturing conducive to

⁸³Christensen, "Religious Conversion in Adolescence," 25.

⁸⁴Helen Carlson, "The Relationship of the Acute Confusional State to Ego Development," International Journal of Psychoanalysis 45 (1961): 517.

⁸⁵Ibid.

healthy ego functioning. Abandonment, irrational punishment, and constriction of development by parents, the main types of family situations which predispose to confusion, were operating in different degrees in T's early years. The warmth and encouragement so important in facilitating identity development through object relationships was, for the most part, lacking.

T's role in the family made it difficult for her to individuate (be independent) and differentiate (maintain healthy psychological distance) from her parents. In her situation, loyalty to her parents meant not having a sense of a separate, autonomous self. If she felt empathy for or identified with one parent in the marital struggles which they openly shared, the other parent was angry and hurt. Generally speaking, this causes a child to invest in maintaining balance (to fill the child's need for security) in the parental relationship instead of channeling energy into personal growth issues. This was certainly T's dilemma. She felt unable to build a life of her own with her parents' approval. Her perception was such that she existed for them and took her identity from them. In adolescence, she had mixed feelings about leaving her childhood home. On the one hand, she wanted to leave to escape the pain she had experienced there; on the other hand, she did not know anything else and felt anxious when she was away from her home.

In Carlson's research on the acute confusional state, T had all of the predisposing factors: poor object relations, history of severe infantile trauma, abandonment, stifled development, and irrational punishing by parents. Having weak ego strength made her particularly vulnerable as she began to attend the charismatic prayer meetings.⁸⁶ The atmosphere of these gatherings was usually very loving and accepting, and T longed for the happy, secure, nurturing family she never had. She felt that with this type of support, she would be able to make a meaningful life for herself and feel that she had something to live for. However, there was also the conditional aspect of having to be "born again," the rite of passage necessary to become part of the group. Acceptance, then, was conditional and based on repentance.

Some of the fundamentalist preachers T encountered during her preconversion period employed shaming strategies to move people to repentance; the shame T sensed evoked feelings of her incest trauma. Instead of making the connection between her sense of shame and being sexually violated, she attributed her negative feelings about herself

⁸⁶Carlson remarks that if the adolescent failed to identify with the primary love object or the same-sex parent, psychological growth is impaired. This manifests itself in a lack of character traits and the adolescent feels a sense of "helplessness" or "nothingness" in certain areas of the psyche. When the young adult tries to meet societal expectations to be independent, he/she is limited and anxious and may approach the threshold of confusion (521).

to the "sinful condition" of all humankind. This caused her to engage in more guilty introspection as she believed that she had to feel even worse before God would accept her. This stage of preconversion is described by Carlson's frustration phase.

T's condition became progressively worse as she wrestled with thoughts of God's existence and her sense that she was an object of God's wrath. She perceived herself as condemned and was not convinced that God could save her. Her inability to concentrate and her sense of desperation characterized this rage phase, along with a sense of paralysis and numbness, the last two being the outcome when the confused person perceives the frustration as traumatic.

According to the DSM-IV, T's condition during this phase met the criteria for Major Depressive Episode (depressed mood, no interest in pleasure, decrease in appetite, loss of energy, hypersomnia, feelings of worthlessness, difficulty with concentration, and suicidal ideation).⁸⁷ During the latter part of the rage phase, T's condition met the criteria for Depersonalization Disorder (feeling like an automaton, reality testing still intact, marked distress, dizziness, depression, obsessive rumination, anxiety, fear of going insane, disturbances in

⁸⁷Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-IV, 4th ed. (Washington D.C.: American Psychiatric Association., 1994), 327.

the sense of time).⁸⁸

As T was trying to deal with the pain she felt, she was also moving toward an object (God) which could restore a sense of hope and meaning to her life. At the moment of conversion, she experienced the connection with this love object. One of the solutions that Carlson identified as a resolution for confusion is falling in love.⁸⁹ With a little stretch of the imagination, one might say that T wanted to fall in love with God. When T finally felt a real connection with God, she was able to begin rebuilding her life around that new relationship.

Christensen saw Carlson's schema as applying to religious conversion with a slight variation. The factors he recognized as operating in conversion are: unconscious conflict resulting from low self-esteem; distorted identity through intrafamilial relationships; the transitional phase of adolescence; and religious fundamentalism as part of the child's early environment and training.⁹⁰ All of these factors were present in T's situation. Christensen also recognized the importance of the expectation of conversion in evangelical contexts, the ego-supporting nature of the belief system, and the acceptance and approval which comes

⁸⁸Ibid., 490.

⁸⁹Carlson, 518.

⁹⁰Christensen, "Religious Conversion in Adolescence," 21.

from following the doctrines.⁹¹

In explaining the actual conversion event, Christensen understood the factors in the religious belief system as precipitating the acute state as well as offering the solution. The unconscious conflict of abandonment by parents, mother's disapproval from birth, and sexual trauma (incest with cousin), with the resulting poor and distorted self-image, provided the "matrix from which the religious experience [developed]."⁹² The feelings of trauma from T's early life were evoked by the shaming messages of the hellfire and damnation sermons she heard. T's defenses began to crumble as the guilt and anxiety intensified. When she could no longer continue the struggle consciously, she relaxed to the point where she could hear the answer from her unconscious ("If God exists, then I can speak in tongues").

Drawing from the works of Paul Federn, Christensen explained the voices which converts hear as the nonegotized parts of the personality making their way into consciousness and perceived as something alien to the self. They are an expression of the psychic presence, a "mental representation of mother... or, that part of mother which was not egotized

⁹¹Ibid., 24.

⁹²Christensen, "Religious Conversion," 210.

in the process of identification."⁹³ The psychic presence is projected outward and interpreted later as the presence of God by the convert. Submitting to God within the context of conversion means yielding to the wishes of mother.

After the event, generally the convert feels elated, has a sense of understanding, feels a change within, and modifies his/her behavior. In T's case, she felt loved and accepted by God and extended this deep love toward others. She also quit drinking because the joy of having found God made her feel content. In this sense, T's experience became egotized. However, because she did not assimilate all aspects of the new changes, she also found herself in the borderline state between no integration and reintegration at a lower level of functioning.⁹⁴

The state of no integration results when the ego is not strong enough to withstand the cathexis of the combined conscious and unconscious conflict: reality testing is gone, disorientation prevails, and symbolic solutions may be adopted (the convert may believe that he/she is some religious figure). Christensen said that this new ego substitute is most likely the psychic presence seeking

⁹³Paul Federn, Ego Psychology and the Psychoses, ed. Edoardo Weiss (New York: Basic Books, 1952). Cited in Christensen, "Religious Conversion," 212.

⁹⁴The other two possibilities in Christensen's schema are reintegration at a more optimal level of functioning than before and reintegration at the previous level. Ibid., 214.

symbolic representation. The solution may continue until the person's own ego is strong enough to take over again; if this does not occur, the delusional system will become chronic.⁹⁵

Christensen understood that reintegration at a lower level occurs because the conflict is not actually resolved. The convert feels whole and complete because of his/her union with the new love object, God (the psychic presence), who is experienced as being outside of the self. The unresolved conflict makes it necessary for repression and defenses to operate and the adopted belief system supports the weak ego, helping to maintain the defenses; any questions about the integrity of the system are perceived as threatening and must be guarded against.⁹⁶ T found herself functioning at the above levels. Her sense of self was swallowed up in the new overpowering "revelation." Although she did not think that she was Jesus Christ, she believed that his power rested upon her and that she was experiencing a manifestation of the divine personality. As mentioned in the case study, she had found many scriptures to support these ideas, so that any challenge from outsiders as to the validity of the Bible were met with opposition by her.

T found herself suspended between nothingness and the

⁹⁵Ibid., 215.

⁹⁶Ibid.

new presence which surrounded her, affirming Carlson's observation that the confusional state can render a person helpless and objectless, thus reenacting the scenario present right after birth.⁹⁷ For T, God (the psychic presence) became the new object by which to reform her identity, the scriptures and fellow Christians imparted information about God, and T restructured her life around the tenets of the new faith.

Boisen. It is evident that much of T's experience can be interpreted in light of the observations and theories of the psychoanalytic school as discussed above. A shortcoming of the approach of this school, however, is its focus on conflict resolution from a purely psychological point of view. The insights of Anton Boisen present a much larger picture of the dynamics found in T's conversion because they address the powerful role played by the religious sentiment in conversion experiences as well as psychological issues.

T's early background contained the factors identified by Boisen as predisposing one to breakdown/conversion episodes. Heredity (mother's history of mental illness), unfavorable environment (physical and emotional abuse), and difficulties in relationships (T's sense of isolation and emotional estrangement) were influences operating in T's case at the time of her conversion. Present also was T's deep longing to bring her life into harmony with ultimate

⁹⁷Carlson, 521.

meaning and values symbolized in the idea of God.

The sense of woundedness from T's past and the striving for ideals embodied in religious sentiments operated in tension during T's preconversion period. The state of "inner conflict and disharmony, accompanied by a keen awareness of ultimate loyalties and unattained possibilities" (also characteristic of James's "divided self"), was identified by Boisen as the hallmark of the crisis period preceding the breakdown/conversion episodes he witnessed in hospital patients.⁹⁸

Like Boisen's patients during the crisis period, T experienced severe discomfort that forced a solution. Like Boisen's patients, T understood her breakthrough/conversion as originating from the supernatural realm. Boisen observed that the impact of the breakthrough, which he understood as an "acute disturbance," was often so "terrific" that it could "destroy the foundations of the mental organization and upset the structure upon which judgments and reasoning processes are based."⁹⁹ As was evident in the case study, T passed through such a period of disorientation, during which she was engrossed in spiritual realities and everyday functioning was impaired.

Boisen labeled the acute disturbances he witnessed in hospital patients as "schizophrenia." This diagnosis is

⁹⁸Boisen, viii.

⁹⁹Ibid., 30.

questionable in T's case because she was aware of the need to get regrounded in consensual reality and to integrate the new knowledge gained through her spiritual awakening. Also, she realized that the spiritual phenomena she encountered were shared by many fellow believers; the common experiences of seeing lights and sensing God's immediate presence were not considered anomalous in T's church community. The diagnostic category that best describes T's symptoms is "bipolar disorder with mixed features" because her moods alternated between elation and despair as she tried to stabilize the emotions evoked by the awakening.¹⁰⁰

Boisen offered unique contributions for understanding the similarities between religious experience and some forms of mental illness. According to him, the "mystical" and "pathological" bear a close resemblance because they both can arise whenever one directly confronts and "grapples" with severe existential angst.¹⁰¹ During these emotional upheavals, one is attempting to reorganize the ego around higher ideals and values represented in the idea of God. When the attempt is successful, "enabling [one] to grow in the direction of inner unification and social adaptation on a basis conceived as universal," the crisis is recognized as religious experience.¹⁰² If the person in crisis fails to

¹⁰⁰DSM-IV, 335.

¹⁰¹Boisen, 298.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*, viii.

stabilize healthily or if he/she further deteriorates, the experience is regarded as chronic mental illness.

As discussed earlier in relation to Salzman's model, T had regressive and progressive trends as she was trying to stabilize. Overall, she gained ground, moving toward health. Like Boisen's patients, she rebuilt her life on the "basis of a mystical experience."¹⁰³ Also like Boisen's patients, she felt a "guiding Intelligence" struggling with her, all the while assuring her that "Love is in control."¹⁰⁴

Conclusions for Pastoral Care and Counseling

The psychoanalytic school has much to offer in its understanding of human development and the complex workings of the human mind. Typically, it emphasizes conversion as a means for conflict resolution. In T's case, it certainly was that, and it was also much more. T was looking for enduring truths and values which could serve as a solid foundation for restructuring her life. Mostly, she was looking for love. One might argue that if she had had a different kind of childhood, she may not have sought out such a religious experience. This is probably true. But the fact remains that many people do not get what they need while growing up and are attracted to those religions which promise guidance, nurturing, meaning for life, and the benefits of being part of a supportive group.

¹⁰³Ibid., 292.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 299, 206.

The basic virtues which emerge in each psychosocial stage as articulated by Erikson are akin to the foundational values espoused by healthy families and healthy religions: hope, willpower, purpose, competence, fidelity, love, care, and wisdom.¹⁰⁵ Ideally, T would have acquired these qualities as she grew up in her family of origin had it been healthy. T's newly found faith offered her an opportunity to experience these life-enhancing values in the family of God. As she interacted within the church community, she began to incorporate these attributes into her personality.

As was evident in T's case, a spiritual awakening which takes place in the life of a person who is in deep crisis may exacerbate an already unstable condition. The individual must assimilate the information brought about by the awakening as well as the unprocessed realities which initially brought him/her to the crisis point. These unprocessed realities are often the nonegotized parts of the self that, if incorporated into the personality, would allow for normal development. If they are suddenly unblocked or unleashed in a weak ego structure which cannot accommodate them, a cataclysmic type of experience is likely to occur. How the experience is labeled will depend on the behavioral manifestations of the convert and the context of its occurrence. For instance, in denominations which expect their members to be born again and to demonstrate tangible

¹⁰⁵Erikson, 274.

evidence of being spirit-filled, eruptive conversions are likely to be accepted as divine action upon a person, not mental illness.

Pastoral counselors are challenged to seek a balance between the purely religious and the purely psychological explanations of a conversion such as T's; this middle ground has implications for both disciplines. T was in need of psychiatric help for months before her conversion experience and many religious people came in contact with her during this time; not one of them suggested that she seek therapy. Psychology has much to offer religion on this issue. Some people are clearly not in a stable psychological place to experience the born again type of conversion. Religionists would also do well to be aware of how hellfire and damnation preaching can cause disintegrative experiences of the personality. The existential dilemmas of human life alone are often enough to bring one to the place of decision to embrace his/her spirituality.

Religion also has something to offer psychology. The aspects of T's case study concerning spiritual phenomena are typical (such as seeing lights, feelings of joy and oneness with God), as has been demonstrated in the research of James and Starbuck. Furthermore, the common themes and patterns which emerge during sudden conversion experiences most often lead converts to healthier, more fulfilling ways of being in relation to the self, others, and God. Converts have

attributed theophanies and their good fruits to the direct intervention of God. A review of the literature on the role played by forces beyond-individual-consciousness reveals that little is said on this issue. As Scroggs and Douglas observe:

The role of the Divine [theistically conceived] in conversion has rarely been dealt with by psychologists except as they have written for evangelical or devotional purposes, and even then rarely except within religiously conservative contexts. By and large, psychologists, whether they be atheists or believers, have studied conversion as though God had absolutely nothing to do with it.¹⁰⁶

As a result of this deemphasis, aspects of change and growth associated with spiritual awakening have not been dealt with in the literature in the psychology of conversion. As was evident in the psychoanalytic theories discussed in this chapter, efforts to understand the origins of conversion have been focused on identifying underlying psychological conflicts and patterns of pathology.

Although T was certainly in emotional conflict at the time of her conversion, the suggestion that the religious aspects of her conversion emerged solely from "pathological" conditions (Christensen) is untenable for two reasons: many people who are not in emotional turmoil have had spiritual awakenings with accompanying theophanies, and many others have experienced emotional upheavals with no spiritual manifestations or themes. In other words, the two

¹⁰⁶Scroggs and Douglas, 212.

experiences are not inevitably related. The fact that T turned to God in her emotional struggle to find peace and meaning in her life does not mean that the turmoil produced the religious experience, or that it was the sole or primary influence.

The most one can say about the relationship between mystical experiences and emotional crises is that they sometimes interact and influence each other. It was apparent in T's case that her seeking a religious solution during a time of emotional crisis opened her to spiritual realities not known to her before. The spiritual awakening itself, however, introduced yet another variable into her situation that also had to be assimilated along with the chaotic elements of emotional upheaval. This variable is identified as spiritual energy in the following chapters. At present, no conceptual model is available for pastoral counselors to understand and work with the interaction of the powerful spiritual and psychological forces which T encountered during her conversion. In the next chapter, one such model is presented.

CHAPTER 2

Views of Spirituality from Transpersonal Psychology
and the Yogic TraditionsIntroduction

The last chapter ended with the discussion pertaining to the psychoanalytic interpretations of sudden Christian conversion experiences with the observation and concern that most psychoanalysts do not consider the possibility of a spiritual dimension to human existence. My basic conviction is that the insights from psychoanalysis cited in Chapter 1 are valuable for understanding the contents and process of the individual's unconscious, but they fall short in their attempt to explain all sudden Christian conversion experiences as mere projections of the individual's unconscious mind.

Had other theorists engaged in the discussion of causality of Christian conversion, more comprehensive models may have emerged. For instance, Carl Jung and Roberto Assagioli were two psychoanalysts who ventured beyond the traditional viewpoints of psychoanalysis to acknowledge the validity and importance of the spiritual dimension of human existence. Their viewpoints are briefly discussed in this chapter. This is followed by a description of current models from the field of transpersonal psychology which incorporate views of human development from the yogic perspective. The purpose of utilizing this literature is to lay a foundation for a more comprehensive understanding of the spiritual

energies that may be operative during the process of transformation.

To illuminate principles from the new models, I will present the case study of Sister Helen. Her faith journey contains many of the characteristics which are identified as signs of spiritual opening in the yogic literature. An analysis and discussion of Sister Helen's case in light of the principles from the transpersonal models will follow. Finally, I will discuss the implications of those findings for pastoral care and counseling.

Alternative Views from Psychoanalysis

As mentioned above, some psychoanalysts have offered views of religious experience that account for transcendent phenomena, offering constructs that go beyond the individual unconscious. Had these ideas been applied to the topic of conversion, a more comprehensive picture may have emerged than the more mechanistic one discussed in Chapter 1.

Carl Jung, for example, thought that human beings possessed a psychic system in addition to the personal conscious and unconscious mind, one which was impersonal, collective, and universal. This "collective unconscious" consists of archetypes, universal symbols and behaviors that are present in every human being across all cultures throughout all time.¹ Symbols of transcendence and rebirth

¹ Carl Jung, The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious, trans. R. F. C. Hull, Collected Works, vol. 9 (New York: Pantheon, 1959), 42ff.

can emerge from this deep part of the psyche into conscious awareness, along with images of superhuman guides to help one on the journey to wholeness and integration. Jung's ideas can be utilized to explain visual phenomena in the conversion process as archetypal figures making their way into a person's consciousness to offer guidance during times of need.²

Another excellent example for an alternative explanation of conversion can be derived from the work of Roberto Assagioli, a psychoanalyst and contemporary of Freud. Although he valued the contributions of the psychoanalytic movement, he recognized that the "pathological approach" often found in dynamic psychology carries with it a "serious liability," because it places too much emphasis on the "morbid manifestations" and on the baser aspects of human nature.³ For him, this dreary and pessimistic perspective of the human being ignores the possibility of exploring humanity's drives toward higher aims and values by explaining them as by-products of the lower drives. Such an approach leads to "unwarranted generalized applications of the many findings of

²Scroggs and Douglas make a similar statement. They recognize that William James' ideas about the "incursions from beyond the margins of consciousness," and their role in all religious experiences, referred more to the collective unconscious in a Jungian sense than to the personal unconscious in a Freudian sense. Scroggs and Douglas, 212.

³Assagioli, 35.

psychopathology to the psychology of normal human beings."⁴

Assagioli answers the limitations of psychoanalytic theory by postulating that other structures besides the unconscious and conscious mind are part of the make-up of the human psyche. His conceptual framework includes the superconscious, the source of higher feelings such as altruism, genius, and states of ecstasy and illumination. It also includes the concept of a Higher Self, a synthesizing spiritual center of which the personal conscious is but a reflection.⁵

In Assagioli's model, disorienting conversion could occur when "the channel between the conscious and the superconscious levels, between the ego and the Higher Self," opens and the personality is not able to assimilate the inpouring of spiritual energies.⁶ This results in what he calls "a confusion of levels"; that is, the person undergoing spiritual awakening has a hard time distinguishing between absolute and relative truths, between the metaphysical and empirical levels of reality.⁷

Assagioli's insights challenge the premises of theories taken from psychoanalysis that understand religious experience as projections of the individual unconscious

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., 18-19.

⁶Ibid., 43.

⁷Ibid., 44.

mind. His model of human nature places the Higher Self, or spiritual center, at "the very core of the human psyche."⁸ Assagioli goes still further in his expansion of psychoanalytic theory when he postulates that this "permanent center" or "true Self" which is found within every individual is connected with a universal Spirit.⁹ "Whether we conceive it as a divine Being or as cosmic energy," it is shaping the universe into harmony and order with the intent of uniting all people through love.¹⁰

Assagioli's concerns and insights are especially relevant to the goals of this dissertation and will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 5. Suffice it to say now that his work exemplifies a transpersonal approach to psychology par excellence. This brief introduction to his ideas leads into the next section of this chapter, a discussion of the viewpoints from the school of transpersonal psychology.

Transpersonal Psychology

Transpersonal psychology is a fairly new development in the human sciences. Abraham Maslow suggested that Third Force Psychology (the Humanistic School) was transitional and a "preparation for a still 'higher' Fourth Psychology, [one that is] transpersonal, transhuman, [and] centered in

⁸Ibid., 35.

⁹Ibid., 18.

¹⁰Ibid., 31.

the cosmos rather than in human needs and interest."¹¹

The Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling defines transpersonal psychologies as follows:

Approaches to psychological and spiritual well being and potential in which experiences and behavior that extend beyond (trans) the personal (persona, personality, or ego) are considered. Higher mental processes and altered states of consciousness are emphasized. A broad nonsectarian integration of schools, perspectives, and techniques, both Eastern and Western is attempted.¹²

The transpersonal school of thought is particularly helpful in reflecting upon sudden conversion because its adherents are willing to deal explicitly with issues concerning spirituality and to address a wide range of phenomena identified as nonordinary states of consciousness. Also, transpersonal psychologies recognize the validity of traditional Eastern views of human nature and the cosmos; this includes the ideas taken from the yogic literature on kundalini energy and kundalini awakenings, key issues in this dissertation. Overall, the school of transpersonal psychology grants the latitude needed for theory building as I seek to present a more comprehensive, integrated view of Christian conversion.

Two pioneers in the transpersonal school are Stanislav Grof and John Nelson. Both are psychiatrists who are well

¹¹Abraham Maslow, Toward a Psychology of Being, 2d ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1968), iii-iv.

¹²Roger N. Walsh, "Transpersonal Psychologies," in Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling, ed. Rodney J. Hunter (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990).

acquainted with the theory and practice of traditional medicine in the U.S. as well as alternative viewpoints taken from other cultures and disciplines.¹³ I will refer to their ideas about the nature and function of "spirit," consciousness, and the development of self to lay groundwork for understanding the transpersonal approach.

In Healing The Split, John Nelson explains that "at the root of the transpersonal perspective is the idea that there is a deep level subjectivity, or pure spirit, that infuses all matter and every event." He refers to this as the Spiritual Ground, the Source from which all of life emanates. At creation, this "living spirit was breathed into all being... as a manifestation of divine nature." This "vital element" permeates the universe, sustaining all sentient life; the dynamic energy which flows from this Ground makes experience and consciousness possible.¹⁴

Nelson goes on to say that the Spiritual Ground exists on a higher level of being than the material world; although it is "beyond form," it contains "transient forms and

¹³ For instance, Stanislov Grof shares that he has integrated findings from experiential psychotherapies, clinical and experimental psychiatry, modern consciousness research, mythology, parapsychology, comparative religion, and thanatology in formulating the concept of spiritual emergency. See Stanislov Grof and Christina Grof, eds., Spiritual Emergency: When Personal Transformation Becomes a Crisis (Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1989), x. John Nelson has extensive knowledge of yogic views of human nature and has combined these insights with those of modern psychiatry in his massive work.

¹⁴Nelson, 9.

hierarchical levels."¹⁵ "Eternal," "beyond knowing," and mysterious, the Ground displays Itself in the world as energy, as the driving force behind all thought, perception, and feeling. Nelson maintains that intense meditative practices which focus one inward expose the presence of this Source at the Ground of one's being, but those "rare adepts" who have encountered the Ground directly say that It is "nothing at all, a void, yet ultimately real."¹⁶

Human consciousness is intimately connected with the activity of the Spiritual Ground according to Nelson. The Ground can be theoretically understood as a field of consciousness akin to gravity or the electrical force field around a magnet. Each individual brain interacts with this consciousness in its own unique way to give it forms and shapes which we call mind. Consciousness is primary and the brain is its "humble servant in the physical world." The Ground gives the brain its vitality. This view of the brain and consciousness is very different from the material view which understands the role of the physical brain as primary and regards consciousness as its "accidental by-product." Nelson says that the materialist view is "seriously flawed," because it cannot give account for how such things as creativity, intuition, and telepathy are generated, not to mention "the richness of human spirit" as demonstrated by

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid., 9-10.

such people as Einstein or Beethoven.¹⁷

The transpersonal view according to Nelson understands human development and Ground consciousness as interactive. As the fetus grows in complexity, "like a vortex the consciousness of the Ground flows and condenses into it, ensouling it, shaping it and taking shape from it." As the brain grows larger and the range of its functions expand, so does the corresponding consciousness field. The human mind begins to acquire its own unique capabilities and forms and remains an "open system" because a perpetual energy exchange is always taking place within the Ground.¹⁸

Nelson explains that as a child begins to form a sense of self, individual consciousness develops as it is taken and condensed from the larger field of Ground consciousness. The child gradually moves away from the "blissful communion and simple unity" which he/she once experienced with the Source by forming a "psychic membrane."¹⁹ By forming this self-boundary, the child is able to actualize as a self

¹⁷Ibid., 8.

¹⁸Ibid., 10.

¹⁹Ken Wilber, whom Nelson identifies as the "leading philosopher of the transpersonal movement," does not agree with Nelson on this point. Wilber thinks that the infant is "one with... the biomaterial world in general and the mothering one in particular." The child is exposed to an "enormous influx," according to Wilber, but these energies are biological and material. Wilber identifies these as the "overwhelming energies of elan vital, prana, libido," and says that just because they are overwhelming does not mean that they are of a spiritual nature. See Nelson, xi.

separate from the Ground and from others. The process of individuation continues as the self assimilates increasing amounts of consciousness into its own being. Nelson understands that this consciousness is a "walled-off portion of the Ground that actively engages the physical brain in mutual interplay."²⁰

Nelson recognizes that the expansion and strengthening of the self-boundary is imperative if one is to survive in this world. This is a development which is acted upon by variables such as genetic make-up, physical health , and different kinds of social relationships. He explains that as a child is engaged in this process, a shift in focus occurs away from the inner world, where the Ground's presence is still felt, toward the outer material world and the mastery of the tasks found there. A gradual forgetting of the Ground begins to take place through a process called "original repression," until the Source is eventually perceived as alien to the self. Nelson says that the memories of the initial conscious union with the Ground remain in the child's subconscious mind as a "source of both fascination and fear."²¹

In Nelson's model, the energies of the Ground and the formed individual self are intricately enmeshed, even though knowledge of this relationship is outside of conscious

²⁰Ibid., 11.

²¹Ibid., 12.

awareness. The Ground sustains and gives vitality to the organism; therefore, the self-membrane has to be sufficiently permeable to allow the influx of this life force. If the inflow of Ground energies is diminished, the person's awareness becomes constricted, shallow, lacking color and passion (depression). On the other hand, the self-membrane has to be strong enough to keep the Ground's energies from flooding in and overwhelming the self, a situation which can cause severe anxiety, or in the extreme, a psychotic state (mania, for example).²²

A balanced relationship between self and Ground is obviously the key to emotional and spiritual well-being in Nelson's schema.²³ "Controlled infusions" from the Ground

²²Ibid., 12.

²³Ken Wilber does not agree with Nelson on this point. He says that "infinite Spirit... doesn't interact with anything,... but rather pervades equally all that is." Wilber remarks that much of what Nelson calls the Spiritual Ground is really the "beginning dimension of transpersonal existence, which does interact with the ego, and does contain energies, and does exert pressure on the ego." The points of divergence expressed by Wilber and Nelson reflect two sides of a current debate taking place among transpersonal theorists. One paradigm stems from Jungian psychology and pictures human development as a spiral. In this model, the ego emerges from the depths of the psyche, separates from these origins during the first half of life in which the ego predominates, then returns to them to become integrated with them on a transegoic plane. Michael Washburn's ideas represent this viewpoint. The other viewpoint is represented by Wilber and pictures human development as linear, with the self progressing from the preegoic levels, through the egoic, and then to transegoic levels. Nelson says that he values both of these viewpoints and has "attempted to partially reconcile them" in his work. See Nelson, vi, xi, xiv, and xv.

are beneficial and desirable, having the effect of increasing one's awareness and facilitating spiritual growth. Some people, such as religious mystics, psychics, and gifted artists, for example, embrace the reality and vitality of the Source directly and comfortably as one would "an old friend." Others, at the opposite ends of the spectrum, cower at the thought of the menacing Ground which threatens to tear down their defenses and send them into episodes of madness.²⁴

Most people fall in between these two extremes, of course, and Nelson believes that they are oblivious to, and "sealed off" from, their Source because they are so involved with the pursuits and concerns of the physical world. Although this "normal" human consciousness is necessary for functioning in the world, it limits one's awareness by obscuring spiritual realities and potential which is found beyond the ego and the material world.²⁵ This alienation from the Spiritual Ground is a primary source of discontent.²⁶

Because of this inherent deep connection between the Spiritual Ground and human consciousness, the self feels a longing to reunite with its Source. The human drive toward spiritual growth and fulfillment, or spiritual emergence, is

²⁴Ibid., 13.

²⁵Ibid., xxi.

²⁶Ibid., 407.

as natural as the inclination toward physical development according to Christina and Stanislov Grof. They explain, "Humanity is an integral part of the creative cosmic energy and intelligence and is, in a sense, identical to and commensurate with it."²⁷ Spiritual rebirth, then, can be understood as the process of reclaiming one's true nature, a moving toward higher levels of awareness and wholeness, and the discovery of one's total potential.²⁸

Transpersonal psychologists utilize insights from the "chakra system" as found in the yogic tradition to understand how body, mind, and spirit are integrated in the process of spiritual rebirth. A system which has been in existence for five thousand years, it provides maps for tracking the development of human consciousness from its origins in the womb to the higher phases of self-actualization and mystical union with the Spiritual Ground.²⁹ The next section presents a brief overview of this system and how it functions.

The Seven Chakras

In the Kundalini yoga tradition, one finds a strong emphasis on physiology as a vehicle for attaining union with

²⁷Christina Grof and Stanislov Grof, The Stormy Search for the Self: A Guide to Personal Growth through Transformational Crisis (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1990), 33-34.

²⁸Ibid., 1.

²⁹Nelson, 161.

the Spiritual Ground. This is accomplished through the activation of spiritual energy, called prana or kundalini in the seven chakras. These two concepts will be discussed in depth in Chapter 3. The word "chakra" is taken from Sanskrit and literally means "wheel." The chakras are localized vortexes of bioenergy in the body which connect the physical system with "subtle" sensory awareness.³⁰ According to transpersonal thought, the subtle level refers to consciousness which goes beyond, but also includes, material reality.³¹ For instance, while one is praying for a sick relative, he/she may sense the presence of God comforting him.

John Nelson explains that the chakras are archetypal centers which are anchored in Ground consciousness. Each chakra opens in stages and has its own unique themes and modes of experience.³² A brief description of these seven centers and the developmental milestones associated with each follows.

1. The Muladhara, or "root prop," chakra is located in the center of the body at the anus. It is traditionally associated with the general distribution of prana, or the life-force, within the body, the sense of smell, and the

³⁰Emma Bragdon, The Call of Spiritual Emergency: From Personal Crisis to Personal Transformation (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 220.

³¹Ibid., 5.

³²Nelson, 162, 165.

feet. First chakra consciousness is experienced in the womb and in the early months of postnatal life. The psychological issues connected with it are trust, material security, groundedness, and acceptance of life on this earth.³³

2. The Svadhishtana, or sacral, chakra is located between the navel and the genitals. It is associated with sexuality, the sense of taste, and the hands. Concerned with creativity, sensuality, pleasure, awe, and relationships, the toddler learns object constancy and begins to experience a basic sense of I-ness identified with the body.

3. The Manipura, or solar plexus, chakra is located between the chest and the navel and is understood as an alternative resting place for the Kundalini (spiritual energy) in some traditions. Physiologically, it is associated with the sense of sight and digestion. Psychologically, the issues of personal power, social identity, self-control, self-acceptance, and the will are salient.

4. The Anahata, or heart, chakra is located in the center of the chest. It is traditionally associated with the

³³Many books have been written about the physiological functions and psychological issues related to each of the chakras. To write these descriptions, I have drawn from some of the main ideas represented in three sources: Nelson, Healing the Split, 161-69; Bonnie Greenwell, Energies of Transformation: A Guide to the Kundalini Process, 2d ed. (Saratoga, Calif: Shakti River Press, 1995), 81-93; and Philip St. Romain, Kundalini Energy and Christian Spirituality: A Pathway to Growth and Healing (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1991), 102-03.

sense of touch, the stimulation of prana, feelings, and the genitals. Spiritual and psychological issues are concerned with opening to the world in the spirit of universal love. Compassion, forgiveness, devotion, selflessness, sharing, transformation, unconditional love, and harmony characterize the full opening of the heart chakra.

5. The Vishuddhi, or throat, chakra is physiologically associated with the mouth, skin, and sense of hearing. Communication, truth, confidence, integrity, freedom, and independence are the qualities connected to this mode of being.

6. The Ajna, or third eye center, is located in the middle of the forehead and is associated with the mind. Inner vision, insight, intuition, imagination, clarity, concentration, and purpose are characteristic of this chakra consciousness. The teacher is believed to contact the disciple telepathically at this chakra, the center which is also connected with clairvoyance and ESP.

7. The Sahasrara, or crown, chakra is found at the top of the head. Literally meaning "thousand spoke," the many spokes or energy pathways of this center facilitate the phenomena of overwhelming bliss and light which results when the forces of kundalini reach the crown chakra. This experience of light is a common occurrence reported by mystics of all religions.

From the standpoint of developmental psychology,

aspects of the first five chakras coincide with stages of growth as outlined by familiar theorists such as Erik Erikson and Jean Piaget. For instance, in first chakra consciousness and Erikson's first stage of psychosocial development, the child is faced with the issues of basic trust and feeling at home in the world.³⁴ At the same time, drawing from Piaget's model for cognitive development, the baby is in the sensorimotor stage, learning about his/her body and physical coordination, and beginning to explore the environment.³⁵ The transpersonal model adds still another window through which to view the child's phenomenological world. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Nelson says that the child at this stage of development is in a state of "blissful communion and simple unity" with the Spiritual Source.³⁶

Nelson explains that progression through the chakras is much like climbing a ladder of increasingly higher energy patterns. Each pattern, or stage of chakra consciousness, contains certain themes and potentials unique to that stage. As the growing self climbs each rung of the ladder, it is exposed to these more complex ways of being and has the opportunity to incorporate them into the personality .

³⁴Erik Erikson, Childhood and Society (New York: W.W. Norton, 1950), 247-74.

³⁵Jean Piaget, The Construction of Reality in the Child, trans. Margaret Cook (New York: Basic Books, 1954).

³⁶Nelson, 11.

Nelson clarifies that the chakras are not creations of the self, but rather "archetypal structures eternally present in the Ground [which] await our attunement" through experience in the world and spiritual development.³⁷

Nelson's schema shows that progression through the chakras is sequential and each stage is absorbed into the next. Although each stage of chakra consciousness is transcended as the self center moves into the higher levels, the capacities and functions of the lower chakras are maintained throughout one's life. For example, the psychic (sixth chakra) who does fund raising for orphanages (fourth chakra) still makes love to his wife (second chakra) and eats when he is hungry (first chakra).

In the following section, I will illustrate and illumine the principles of chakra consciousness and development by presenting the case study of Sister Helen. A Roman Catholic nun, Helen entered the convent at a young age before Vatican II, and soon found herself on the cutting edge of her changing church. These changes opened doors for her which allowed her to experience new possibilities for spiritual and psychological growth. Her faith journey contains many of the characteristics which can be identified as signs of healing and spiritual opening according to the chakra model.

During the initial 2 1/2 hour interview with Sister

³⁷Ibid., 165.

Helen, I asked her to tell her story and I occasionally asked questions for clarification. The session was taped and transcribed. The interview was then analyzed thematically according to the method described in Chapter 1; the data were gathered into a case study. After that case study is presented, an interpretation will be offered of Sister Helen's story in light of the principles found in the chakra model. This interpretation is followed by a commentary on how insights from this case study can be applied to the practice of pastoral care and counseling.

Case Study -- Sister Helen

Sister Helen describes her background as very religious. Her mother and grandmother were devout Catholics. Although her father was not Catholic, he still took her to Mass when she was very young. Sister Helen says that her grandmother had many spiritual experiences throughout her life. Her sharing of these experiences with Helen greatly influenced Helen's religious development.

Sister Helen's parents were separated when she was nine years old, her grandmother died, and she and her mother went to live with her grandfather. At this time, they were closely involved with her aunt and uncle, who were also her godparents. She remembers pursuing her faith as a child. She rode her bike in the cold to attend Mass everyday during Lent. In high school, she belonged to a religious organization which was very strict. She remarks that the

novitiate was nothing compared to what she did in high school. As a member of this group, she attended church services and meetings frequently and had responsibilities such as cleaning the sacristy. Sister Helen says, "We'd clean for hours and get one merit and we'd miss a meeting and get ten demerits. But there was something... we just thrived on that; it was a challenge, I guess, for us. We wanted to be the best."

Sister Helen's mother died when she was in her junior year of high school. She was thirty-four and had been more like a sister to Helen. At this point, Sister Helen wrestled with the idea of entering the convent. She said that she had put this thought on the "back burner" in the past, because her mother had promised that they would spend a lot of time together after Helen's graduation. With her mother's death, everything changed for her and she decided to go right into the novitiate.

Religious life had its ups and downs for Sister Helen. She found the "barriers," such as the permissions and penances, very difficult. She decided that this was the way things were supposed to be; she accepted them because she "wanted to be the best religious there was." When the changes from Vatican II took place, Sister Helen began to feel that she was on her own. Her order gave up wearing habits and pursued new areas for ministry. Sister Helen felt free and responsible for her own life and decisions. She

asked to go into parish ministry and was granted this request.

Sister Helen shares that during her eight years in the parish, she had some turning point encounters. She talks about the "freeing experience" she had while working on her MRE in another state; this was the first time she had been separated from her community in twenty-three years: "I remember the nights we went dancing; a whole group of us used to go to this little theater. I remember the first night that I danced," and she adds playfully, "I had to drink three beers to do it. I think we danced 'til four o'clock in the morning. And I remember coming home and just dancing in my room by myself for about another hour and being so filled with the Spirit." She says that before she entered the convent, she had loved to dance. After she became a nun, she prayed that something would happen to her legs so she wouldn't feel so bad about not being able to dance anymore. When she went to the restaurants with the group and just danced, she felt like a door opened up.

During the three summers when she was working on her MRE away from her community, she was sent to marriage workshops. One summer, she "fell madly in love with one of the fellows in the group and he got real scared." At first, he wrote her long letters, then he wouldn't talk to her. She wondered, "What's the matter with him?" Sister Helen says that she met some men during this time who were interested

in her and others for whom she felt an attraction, but it took awhile before she experienced an encounter in which the attraction was mutual. She then had a decision to make. Sister Helen says that she grew up a lot and lived through the adolescence that she hadn't really been through. (She was seventeen when she entered the convent and in her early forties during this part of her life.) She says that she doesn't regret anything, because she had to learn an awful lot about herself.

After eight years of working in the parish, Sister Helen felt it was time to move on. She wanted to share her talents with others in the field of religious education. She applied for a job as director of R.E. in the diocese and was hired. She says that she kept this job for only a year, because after six months, she felt herself "down." She goes on to say that it was a very painful year for her; she struggled with it and certainly did not get through it. In the spring of that year, her "prayer life deepened an awful lot in the sense that it was the only thing that got [her] from one day to the next, and often from one moment to the next."

Sister Helen went to a workshop on Ash Wednesday. She remembers going back into her room and having the sensation that her body was in one place and her spirit was in another. She felt very strained. She talked to a Carmelite monk who had helped her work through difficult situations in

the past and he told her to pay attention to the Spirit. When she went into work the next morning, she gave her resignation. Sister Helen shares that this was difficult to do, because her ego said, "Oh, but you were the first woman to be here, and what is everybody else going to think?" She thought it over and told herself that she needed to do what was best for her regardless of what anyone else was going to think or say. She felt free, truly free.

When Sister Helen finished her work that year, she wanted to go into prayer ministry. She explained that God had been so close, yet so far away during that year. In the depths of her darkness, she knew that God was there without a doubt, because she wouldn't have gotten to the next day had there not been a power greater than she, pulling her into the next moment. Many things happened that she knew she had not caused, and she was aware that there was an unseen power who was directing her life. She shares that she always had a sense of that power ever since she was a little girl. This unseen power directed her and came through for her whenever she called.

Sister Helen took a part-time job in another parish where she ministered to senior citizens and led three scripture study and prayer groups. She felt called to tell people about God and to help them get in touch with what was going on in their lives. She enjoyed this experience. At this time, she met another sister who also wanted to go into

prayer ministry. She and Sister Helen went to the bishop to ask if they could open a house of prayer. He gave them "his blessing, but no money" and suggested that they try to find an old vacant convent to use. They put an ad in the paper and another sister responded, offering her house with all of its furnishings. That summer, Sister Helen and her friend opened HOPE (House of Prayer Experience), where they taught yoga, meditation, nutrition, psychology, exercise.

During this time, Sister Helen took a Yoga workshop with a Benedictine sister who was a licensed Yogi. She learned about chakras, centering prayer, and diet from a Jesuit priest who had been in Japan for twenty-five years. She also met a man who had been adopted by a Sioux family; he told her all about auras. One day when she was in his tea shop, she began to look around at the other people there and "sensed their colors." When she finished, she said, "Whew, what's going on in here? I have just somehow picked it up!" She explains that she had always been interested in Eastern spirituality. She was drawn to ritual and transcendence. When she was working in liturgy, she liked symbolism and silence and touch, using a lot of concrete things. She was also interested in Native American spirituality. She says:

I got this thing about an integrated spirituality. It's got to be body, mind, and spirit... it all has to be connected. I read and began to incorporate more and more from holistic health and Eastern spirituality; this became a part of my life.

The following year they moved the house of prayer and

became incorporated; their ministry was supported by pledges and donations. During the next two years, they struggled through some hard times, but also saw "lots of miracles" happening in others' lives as well as their own. Supplies and money "would just come" at the eleventh hour from unexpected, unlikely sources. They moved again and became even more active in the community, giving courses in meditation and nutrition and sending out a monthly newsletter. Sister Helen said, "We just became as broad as we could." The seventh year she was tired and knew that she needed some kind of change.

That summer Sister Helen attended a retreat during which she participated in prayer, imaging, exercise, meditation, mantras, and chanting. Group counseling sessions were held everyday and classes on nutrition and Eastern spirituality. Here, Sister Helen had the opportunity to get a massage for the first time and figured, "Why not?" She shared her experience of this:

The woman began working on my back, and I had some tender spots there. I jumped a little bit and she asked, "Does that hurt?" I said, "No, it's just very tender. What causes that?" The massage therapist said, "Well, it's over your heart. You have some wounds there, probably from childhood." Well, that's all she needed to say, and I began to cry. So, she began working with me. With her hands on the tender spot, she asked me to describe it. I described a band; it was like a gray fog around my chest. Then I began to talk about the rejection I had felt as a child with my mother. [The massage therapist] role-played my mother and I actually went back to when I was in my mother's womb. It was just the most overwhelming experience I'd ever had. I worked through and got some wonderful insights about my mother and why she acted the way she

did toward me. I worked through and had a real healing. And when I had finished, I really felt that I had had a rebirth. It was such a powerful experience that I said, "If this is what massage does, I want to get into it."

When Sister Helen returned from the retreat, she inquired about different schools that taught this skill. At Mass, she prayed for direction and "miraculously" found a sponsor who said to her, "I believe that this is what the Lord wants you to do." Sister Helen signed up for the training and became a licensed massage technician. She confides that while she was learning this, she thought, "What are you doing?; I can't believe I'm doing this!" But she went ahead with it.

Sister Helen was very tired at the end of that year. She and another sister, a psychologist, were going to open a house, pooling their efforts and using their talents to help others. Helen shared that every time they went to look at a place for their work, she felt sick to her stomach. She would say, "I haven't got what it takes to start over again. I'm tired. I have no energy." She also came to a point that she felt she was just saying words. She would get up and tell people all about God, then sit back and say, "I don't know who God is. This isn't being authentic. How can I tell people to pray? How can I tell them all of this when there's nothing there inside of me?"

Sister Helen said that "by Providence," she heard that a workshop was to be offered by a Jesuit priest who had

"blended Eastern and Western thought." She was already familiar with and fascinated by this man's work. She attended his five day workshop; she said, "He pulled the rug out from under me, turned me upside down and inside out." She shared some of the insights she learned from the priest:

There isn't just a Christian God; there is a power -- God. Everybody has some truth, and this truth, I believe, is this God. Everything is a finger pointing to the moon, but we get stuck on the finger (religion, devotions, or even Jesus); we just look at the finger. I also learned about what truth is and the dying of the ego. One thing that was very forceful for me was his example of a rope formed into a circle in a lake: he asked, "What is the difference between the water inside the rope and the water outside? None. The whole process of our journey is realizing that there is no separation between the dancer and the dance, the singer and the song." I was nourished by that thought and realized that I had to take time to see who I was, where I was going, and what my life was all about.

When she returned home from the workshop, she asked her council representative for sabbatical leave. This was "out of form"; usually a request had to be made six months in advance. Sister Helen told her representative that she wanted to live six months by the ocean and six months by the mountains, and do nothing. She was given permission to do this.

In describing her year away, she said that she stopped all formal prayer because she needed to let go of everything and just experience her own being. She was "confused, troubled, and doubtful. She described the feelings:

There was emptiness and darkness and I just waited and waited. Then there was a light. I felt a little bit of joy in my heart and thought, "It will come back one day," and then it faded.

During her time in the mountains, Sister Helen spent a lot of time with the five year-old son of one of the caretakers. They talked and hiked, looked at flowers, watched the trees, and played games together. This "very special child" was a source of healing for her wounded inner child of the past. She said that she doesn't know what she would have done without him. She had very little contact with her friends during this time. She did, however, come into town once a week to visit and attend to the needs of her elderly aunt.

Most of Sister Helen's time was spent alone "in the darkness." She said of this year: "I didn't know where God was, or who God was, or who I was. I would cry out, and somehow there was somebody there." She attended six retreats that year and attended a Buddhist/Christian dialogue. She shared with one of the groups there that she didn't know where she was going in her life. She felt as though she was being carried, but did not know in which direction. After her sabbatical leave, she "felt free again" and became active in community life. She worked in a small parish for nine months.

When she left there, she went through a "discernment process," during which she realized that her gifts were in the area of holistic spirituality. She wanted to do spiritual direction through body work and teach stress reduction and relaxation techniques in workshops and

retreats. Her council granted her permission to do this. Today, Sister Helen runs a house of prayer together with another sister. Their focus is on teaching and helping others to benefit from an integrative spirituality. This ministry has touched many people and continues to grow.

Theoretical Analysis

Sister Helen has reflected on her faith journey in relation to a chakra model, and her story can be interpreted as an exemplar of chakra issues and chakra healing. A turning point for her was when she began to grieve her childhood pain during the massage. Because of the physical location of the pain in back of the heart and the contents which emerged during the subsequent discussion, one can surmise that this signaled the healing potential of the fourth chakra. Sister Helen describes this experience as a rebirthing, because she was able to get in touch with feelings of being in her mother's womb. This content points to a return to the first chakra where she was able to explore concerns she had about the mothering she had received. Here she gained insights into events of her childhood from her mother's perspective. The fourth chakra feelings of compassion and understanding were released toward herself and her mother, which helped heal the painful memories associated with her earliest years of life.

When Sister Helen spent time with the little boy in the mountains, her own inner child began to heal and play.

The second chakra is indicated here. Healing took place as she was allowed to reexperience these earlier parts of her life with the help of her little companion. Second chakra issues around identity and relationships were also addressed when Sister Helen explored her feelings of attraction toward men. Facing these issues regarding identity in relationships and sexual expression allowed her to relive the parts of her adolescence which she missed in entering the convent at a young age.

Sister Helen had already accomplished much of the work of the third chakra. Situations which called for personal power and a sense of social identity appear to have been met with skill and confidence. Her competence was recognized by others and she held positions of responsibility and leadership within the community. One growing edge which she did work on in this area was self-acceptance. The changes which she went through during her journey taught her that "it was okay to be who [she] was."

In transpersonal thought, the opening of the fourth chakra signals the beginning of the movement into the spiritual realms. One may suspect that Sister Helen was well along on her spiritual path before the time of the massage and the deep opening of the fourth chakra which she experienced then. Before this time, she had quite naturally picked up the ability to see auras, an indication of sixth chakra activity. The fourth chakra activity during the

massage was probably a sign of its reopening; this was a catalyst for healing in other areas, especially in the lower level chakras.

Sister Helen has continued to reflect on her spiritual journey since the time of her first interview. In a second interview, she described a recent experience. She was at a prayer shrine and says that she experienced a different kind of seeing, a looking beyond into a different dimension. Trees at a distance were in three dimensions, like viewing a hologram. She had a similar experience while looking at a calendar. She said that she actually looked through the calendar about three or four inches. This indicates sixth chakra consciousness, according to Barbara Ann Brennan.³⁸ As mentioned earlier, this ability to "see" was also demonstrated by Sister Helen when she saw people's auras in her friend's tea shop.

Sister Helen also talked about some of her experiences with spiritual energy. When she is using Reiki, sometimes she shakes a lot. She attributes this to the connection she feels with the other person's energy. She sometimes feels a surge of her own energy going into the other person. Sister Helen remarks that she doesn't view any of this as dramatic. These phenomena feel natural to her.

³⁸Barbara Ann Brennan, Hands of Light: A Guide to Healing Through the Human Energy Field (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), 157.

Conclusions for Pastoral Care and Counseling

For pastoral counselors, many of the ideas presented in this chapter are not foreign. The inherent human tie to divinity and the inclination to develop spiritually have been addressed by numerous pastoral counselors and theologians. Howard Clinebell, for example, understands human nature as "inherently transpersonal and transcendent" and maintains that human fulfillment can only occur if one is "in relationship to the larger spiritual reality."³⁹ The scriptures of the Hebrew and Christian traditions contain similar ideas about human nature and the need for a relationship with God. The human being is created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27), made "a little lower than God" (Ps. 8:5), and has a soul that longs for the living God "as a deer longs for flowing streams" (Ps. 42: 1-2).⁴⁰ The call to salvation through belief in Jesus Christ (John 3:16) and the admonition to be guided by the Spirit, bearing its fruits (Gal. 5:25) are common themes which are familiar. This suggests that pastoral counselors do have a role in helping clients to access their own innate spiritual wisdom.

Another area with which pastoral counselors are well acquainted is the study of unfolding stages of human growth. The seven chakra system coincides with developmental models

³⁹Howard J. Clinebell, Growth Counseling: Hope-Centered Methods of Actualizing Human Wholeness (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), 101.

⁴⁰Scripture is from the New RSV.

offered by theorists such as Freud, Erikson, Piaget, and Maslow. With the exception of Maslow, however, who allows for "peak experiences," traditional models stop at the level characterized by fifth chakra consciousness. The chakra system offers to pastoral counseling a more expansive view of human growth. It does this by recognizing the possibility for human potential to extend into higher transpersonal realms, which include such phenomena as ESP (sixth chakra) and mystical states (seventh chakra). The acknowledgment represents a fundamental departure from the more mechanistic models of psychoanalysis discussed in Chapter 1.

Another unique contribution of the chakra model to pastoral care and counseling is its integrative approach to body, mind, and spirit. Nothing comparable is available in present developmental models. However, if one merges Freud's psychosexual stages, Erikson's psychosocial stages, Piaget's phases of cognitive development, Kohlberg's stages of moral reasoning, Fowler's stages of faith, and others, a comprehensive picture emerges which is incredibly expansive and informative. In fact, one can utilize the detailed information to augment the chakra model. The distinctive contributions of the chakra model are its challenges to take account of physiological energies as well as psychic and social ones, and to view human development integratively. Such an approach allows pastoral counselors to work from a broader base of information and wisdom.

CHAPTER 3

Awakening the Physio-Kundalini

Suddenly, with a roar like that of a waterfall, I felt a stream of liquid light entering my brain through the spinal cord. I was no longer... as I knew myself to be.., but instead was a vast circle of consciousness in which the body was but a point, bathed in light and in a state of exaltation and happiness impossible to describe.

Gopi Krishna, Kundalini: The Evolutionary Energy

Introduction

Kundalini awakening is a transformative process which has been known to the yogic traditions for thousands of years. Understood as a psychophysiological mechanism, the kundalini experience can bring emotional balance, strength, and wholeness to its recipient when allowed to progress to completion. The process itself, however, is often accompanied by unusual physical and psychological symptoms which are easily mistaken for bodily or mental illness. John Nelson observes that, over the past decade, the kundalini phenomenon has become increasingly recognized by mental health professionals in the United States.¹

This chapter approaches the topic of kundalini awakening from three different perspectives. First, I will discuss its significance within the traditional yogic views of energy and the philosophical aspects associated with it. This provides a basic understanding of what kundalini is and how it is perceived as meaningful to the aspirants who seek

¹Nelson, 269.

to awaken it. I will draw from the works of John White, an educator and author in parascience and consciousness research, and Bonnie Greenwell, a psychologist and yogic scholar. Because the kundalini phenomenon has been a vital part of the Tantric Yoga tradition for thousands of years, the prevailing philosophy which has been used to understand and explain this experience springs from the ground of Indian mythology. To talk about these insights, I will refer to the works of Swami Rama, a Hindu monk and teacher of yoga.

The second two perspectives presented in this chapter will deal with the somatic and psychological symptoms associated with the awakening of kundalini. Lee Sannella, a psychiatrist who has done extensive research in this area says that "there is indeed a remarkable uniformity in the descriptions of [this] transformative process from widely disparate traditions."² I will draw from the findings of his research to identify those common physiological and psychological factors.

Next, to illumine these findings from kundalini research, I will present the case study of Philip. A Christian who experienced a renewal of faith through the Catholic charismatic movement, Philip underwent yet another stage of intense spiritual growth which he identifies as a kundalini awakening. As he was traveling this unknown and

²Sannella, 9.

arduous path, he recorded his experiences in a journal. Philip's case study is taken from the information found there and presented in paraphrased form. This will be followed by an analysis, in which I bring his story into critical dialogue with the insights from research of Sannella and Greenwell. Finally, I will comment on the potential contributions of kundalini awakening for the field of pastoral care and counseling.

Definition and Philosophical Underpinnings
from the Yogic Tradition

The definition for kundalini energy is taken from the original Hindu schools, since the concept is not yet well-developed within current Western reality models. Simply defined, kundalini is the personal form of the cosmic life force called "prana" by yogis, "ch'i" by the Chinese, and "ki" by the Japanese.³ Christians may identify this universal energy as the Holy Spirit. In general, it is understood as the source from which all of life springs and is sustained.

In Sanskrit, the word "kundala" means "coiled" and kundalini is often pictured as a coiled serpent in a resting position. "Shakti," a word which is frequently used in connection with kundalini, is taken from the root word "shak," which means "to be able" or "to have power." These

³John White, Kundalini, Evolution and Enlightenment (New York: Paragon House, 1990), 21.

words, used together, can be understood as coiled-up energy or the "resting potential."⁴ This "resting potential" lies dormant at the base of the spine in the first, or Muladhara, chakra. When the kundalini becomes active, it moves upward through the spinal column, piercing and opening the chakras until it reaches the Sahasrara, or seventh, chakra at the crown of the head. When awakened fully in a human being, kundalini brings her recipient to high levels of awareness, resulting in what various traditions may call "samadhi," universal consciousness, or enlightenment.⁵

The above principles are best understood within the cultural context from which they arose. According to Indian philosophy, the cosmos is actually "pure consciousness" which exists in two forms. The god Shiva represents the "static" aspect of this consciousness and the goddess Shakti represents its "creative" and "dynamic" qualities. Shiva is depicted as "formless being" and the "power holder" who is uninterested in revealing himself in the universe. He is completely preoccupied in a deep state of blissful meditation. Shakti, his female counterpart, is active and filled with energy; she is manifested as the universe itself. Shakti is the mother of the universe; all form

⁴Swami Rama, "The Awakening of Kundalini," in White, 27. This article was written specifically for inclusion in White, Kundalini, Evolution and Enlightenment.

⁵ White, 21.

issues from her.⁶

Although these two principles of consciousness are actually joined, the illusion of separation exists in the created world. Shakti "veils the consciousness from which she was projected." As she moves away from her stationary position, she herself is divided into two forms: the dynamic principle which creates and is the universe, and the primal energy which remains after the universe is manifested. This dormant primal energy is pictured in Hindu mythology as a serpent bearing and maintaining the cosmos.⁷

In Hindu philosophy, the human being is understood as a "miniature" version of the cosmos. The view of the creation and activity in the cosmos described above have direct parallels within the human body. Kundalini is resting in a coiled position at the base of the spine in the root chakra. In the same manner in which she supports the cosmos, she also supports each individual human life through the dynamic energy which emanates from her. This active energy, referred to as "prana," is organized around the bioenergy centers (chakras) and flows through a network of nerves (nadis) like an electrical current. Prana links the body with the mind and provides the energy forces which keep the human organism alive and functioning.⁸

⁶Rama, 27-28.

⁷Ibid., 28.

⁸Ibid., 29-30.

Only a very small amount of kundalini's energy is required to sustain the human body, so that an incredible amount of latent energy lies in reserve at the base of the spine. Swami Rama remarks that, according to tradition, Shakti consists of "latent memories" as well as energy. These memories are of a personal and spiritual nature, and are akin to our concept of the unconscious. In the same way that people who have "controlled access" to the forces of the unconscious exhibit "energy, insight, and creativity," those people who mobilize Shakti into action become the "dynamic geniuses of every age and culture."⁹

This activation of Shakti signals the beginning of the transformative process known as kundalini awakening. The latent energy moves upward from the base of the spine and pierces the chakras one by one until it reaches the crown chakra. In Hindu mythology, the crown chakra is actually the abode of Shiva.¹⁰ When Shakti unites with Shiva at the crown center, it is believed that the aspirant encounters the reality of the inner Self, or pure consciousness.¹¹

Some general comments from Swami Muktananda, a perfected master of yoga, will be helpful for understanding the significance of kundalini awakening from the perspective

⁹Ibid., 32-33.

¹⁰Ibid., 32.

¹¹Swami Muktananda, Kundalini: The Secret of Life (South Fallsburg, N.Y.: SYDA Foundation, 1979), 17.

of religious belief and practice in India. Referring to the wisdom of the ancient sages, the Upanishads, he says that the whole cosmos is "created out of the bliss of God" and that this bliss is the birthright of every person. Although the inner Self is filled with bliss, people don't usually access this part of themselves, because they think that happiness comes from without. The only way to come to Self knowledge and realize true happiness is to awaken the kundalini. She is the power of the Self, of consciousness.¹²

Kundalini Shakti is revered in Hindu religion as "the pathway to God" and the "face of Shiva." Muktananda writes:

When one acquires the strength of Kundalini, one expands infinitely, and then one assimilates this whole universe; one is able to see the whole universe within one's Self. One no longer remains a limited, bound creature; one achieves total union with God. One merges with Shiva and becomes Shiva.¹³

As one can see from the quote, kundalini, in Hindu thought, is not just a means for reaching communion with the divinity; she is the key to divinization itself. Muktananda explains that when kundalini reaches the crown,

it makes the knowledge arise in you that everything is the play of God. This is called pure knowledge....when this pure knowledge arises in you, you attain Godhood.¹⁴

Muktananda says that every person needs to understand that

¹²Ibid., 11-13.

¹³Ibid., 17-18.

¹⁴Ibid., 43.

God is within, that the human body is God's greatest temple. A great poet-saint of India, Tukaram Maharaj, is quoted by Muktananda to emphasize this point: "I went to look for God, but didn't find God. I myself became God. In this very body, God revealed Himself to me."¹⁵

The importance of kundalini and the need to awaken her is understood within traditional religious circles in India, and many of the religious practices found there are directed toward that aim. Muktananda says that kundalini Shakti rarely arises spontaneously; it is usually activated by one of several methods: intense devotion toward God, repeating a mantra (sacred word), yogic practices, or Shaktipat. This last method, Shaktipat, is the "easiest and best" way according to Muktananda. The Guru actually transmits his/her own Shakti into the disciple through touch, look, word, or thought. This sets the kundalini into motion in the aspirant and the Guru directs it through any blocks that may be encountered.¹⁶

The yogic traditions familiar with kundalini energy know of its tremendous potential to transform, as well as break down, the body and the psyche. Therefore, aspirants are strongly advised to follow a spiritual path to discipline the body, thoughts, and emotions before awakening these powerful forces, preferably under the direction of an

¹⁵Ibid., 47.

¹⁶Ibid., 18-24.

experienced guide. In "The Awakening of Kundalini," Swami Rama states:

Without long and patient practice in purifying oneself and strengthening one's capacity to tolerate and assimilate such a flood of energy, the awakening of this latent energy would deeply disturb, disorient, and confuse the student.¹⁷

Rama's observations are especially significant to the topic of this dissertation. In Chapter 1, mechanistic theories were discussed which identified conflict resolution and psychological projection as the matrix for sudden religious conversion experience. Rama's quote suggests the possibility that the spiritual awakening itself could be causing psychological upheaval. This idea will be fully explored in the next chapter.

The next section of this chapter discusses the actual process of kundalini awakening and identifies some of the clinical concerns which often accompany this powerful vehicle for transformation. The writings of Swami Rama and Swami Muktananda are utilized as main sources; both of these men have encountered kundalini awakenings routinely in the context of spiritual praxis in India. Other works utilized are those of Lee Sannella, a psychiatrist and cofounder of the Kundalini Clinic in San Francisco, and Bonnie Greenwell, a psychologist and yogic scholar. Both clinicians and researchers, they have independently explored the phenomenon of kundalini awakenings through case study analyses.

¹⁷Rama, 35.

Physiological Aspects

The classical model for kundalini awakening describes the ascent of spiritual energy as starting from the first, or Muladhara chakra, at the base of the spine, then moving upward through the spinal column until it reaches its destination in the Sahasrara, or crown chakra. Lee Sannella's findings from his clinical data demonstrate that the movement of the kundalini often starts at the feet or legs, then proceeds upward along the spinal cord to the top of the head, then back down over the face, continuing to proceed downward until it reaches the abdomen.¹⁸

Sannella speculates about how the two different descriptions for the path of kundalini could possibly be explained. It is not probable, in his opinion and mine, that two related but different mechanisms are operating here because the descriptions of the phenomenon are too much alike. Only the reports of the locations for the starting and ending points of the kundalini cycle are different. Sannella thinks that these contrasting reports could possibly be the results of perceptual differences attributable to the ways in which language and preconceived expectations can actually shape one's reality.¹⁹

For instance, if the aspirant who is familiar with the classical Hindu model expects the kundalini movement to

¹⁸Sannella, 33.

¹⁹Ibid.

start at the base of the spine, he/she may not pay attention to activities that do not coincide with that description. Sannella points out that those people who experience kundalini awakenings without any preconceived ideas of how it works may actually be more objective and their accounts more accurate.²⁰

Once the kundalini energy is in motion, it begins to remove any blocks it encounters in its path. After a blockage is removed, the kundalini freely moves through that area and flows upward until it meets the next point of resistance. Sannella says that one of the functions of the kundalini activity is to eliminate stress from the central nervous system and observes that the "most striking sensations," such as heat and pain, are likely to occur at these blocked areas. The Sanskrit scriptures identify three "knots" or areas which are particularly prone to resistance: the root, heart, and forehead chakras. Aspirants are taught that these "knots" can be pierced through focusing the breath and concentration.²¹

²⁰Ibid., 34. In my own experiences with this energy, as outlined in the case study of T, I remember that the electrical sensations started in my legs and moved upward into the lower trunk, then into the heart area. While praying a few hours later, the energies began to stream from the top of my head and down my back. Years later, when I read accounts of people who had undergone kundalini awakenings, I related to the occurrences associated with the overall experience, although all of the details were not exactly the same.

²¹Ibid., 31-32.

In Energies of Transformation, Bonnie Greenwell categorizes the physiological aspects associated with kundalini awakenings into six groups:²²

1. Kriyas are physical movements prompted by the awakened energy which are meant to cleanse the body and nervous system.²³ Some examples of kriyas are: sudden fast movements of the head, arms, or legs; involuntary jerking or shaking; involuntary dancing, running, or making sounds; feelings of stiffness.

2. Internal Physical Sensations - Examples are: feelings of bliss, ecstasy, or being intoxicated; chest pains, increase in pulse rate, nausea, headaches, backaches, chronic bodily pain which is hard to diagnose; sensitive hearing, energy and vibrations coming out of the ears; going into a trance state, feeling detached; tingling sensations at the top of the head; numbness in the hands, arms, or feet; body feeling lightweight; out-of-body experiences.

3. Visual Problems - Examples are: temporary blindness, blurred vision, or acute vision; seeing auras, bright lights; eyes burning.

4. Changes in Eating Habits - Examples are: changes in appetite; tendency to give up meat and mood altering substances; food cravings.

²²The lists of possible symptoms in these categories are very thorough. The following samples represent a brief overview of Greenwell's findings, 32-34.

²³Muktananda, 52.

5. Temperature Changes - Examples are: hot flashes, heat or burning sensations; flashes of freezing cold which sometimes alternate with the hot flashes.

6. Illness or Pseudo-Illness - Some examples are: paralysis with no apparent cause; feeling that one is dying; problems with digestion.

Greenwell's list is fairly complete. Two other common experiences are spontaneous irregular breathing patterns and whistling, hissing, or humming sounds which are heard internally. These are phenomena which are revealed in two of the case study reports and reported in Sannella's work.²⁴

Greenwell observes that a person's physiological response to kundalini awakening is not predictable. Some people have dramatic somatic symptoms while others hardly react at all. The physical symptoms generally last for days or weeks. In the yogic literature, this irregular pranic activity is often attributed to the lack of purity and discipline in the aspirant.²⁵ Greenwell adds that some of the uncomfortable physical symptoms which occur during kundalini awakenings are caused by the release of toxins in the body.²⁶ Those who have had poor diets, or who have used drugs or alcohol may be more prone to discomfort. Muktananda emphasizes that the kundalini is actually

²⁴Sannella, 94-96.

²⁵Rama, 44.

²⁶Greenwell, 31.

saturating the nadis (nerves - all 720 million of them!), purging the harmful fluids in the system, and filling the body with rejuvenating prana.²⁷ In other words, the physical side effects that a person endures throughout this process can be understood as healing taking place.

In concluding this section, I want to mention briefly the work of Itzhak Bentov. His contributions are cited by both Sannella and Greenwell. An inventor of biomedical equipment and one who experienced kundalini energy personally, he did much research on the human nervous system. Bentov was particularly interested in how practices of meditation could affect the nervous system.

Drawing from the insights of Hans Selye, Bentov stated that the human organism which was preoccupied with managing stress was limited in moving toward higher states of consciousness. This is why meditative practices emphasize a calming of the body. The stresses in the human organism are actually patterns of energy which must be "converted and eliminated." One of the functions of kundalini is to throw off this bodily stress to allow for higher consciousness states. The intensity of symptoms from kundalini activity, then, is directly related to the amount of stress each person carries.²⁸

Bentov outlined a model for how the physio-kundalini

²⁷Muktananda, 34.

²⁸Greenwell, 113.

could progress through the human organism. He basically says that the meditator sets off a reaction in the heart-aorta system which, in turn, affects brain wave activities. The stimulation of various centers in the brain can cause symptoms such as tingling sensations and paralysis, as well as feelings of peace, bliss and enhanced sensitivity to environmental stimuli. His neurophysiological model is very elaborate and the brief mention of it here does not do it justice, but rather is intended to direct the reader to his work.²⁹

Psychological Dimension

As kundalini energy moves through the body, it often has a dramatic impact on the workings of the mind as well. Bonnie Greenwell has compiled an extensive list of psychological symptoms associated with kundalini awakenings.

Among the common emotional reactions identified by Greenwell are: mood swings; the impression that one is dying; feelings of anger, guilt, anxiety, and depression; mental confusion and difficulty with focusing; difficulty with sleeping; impulsive urges to "uproot one's life"; thoughts that one is affecting others' energy fields, or that one is being affected by others' energy fields; feelings of having contact with otherworldly beings, such as

²⁹Itzhak Bentov's theory is presented in "Micromotion of the Body as a Factor in the Development of the Nervous System," in Stalking the Wild Pendulum (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1977). See Sannella, Appendix 1, 127-49.

spirit guides; having visions, seeing lights, or hearing sounds; difficulty with making decisions, fragmented thought processes; problems with boundaries; and, feelings of grandiosity and inflation.³⁰

These symptoms can be mild to severe and are often mistaken for signs of mental illness by mental health professionals, well-meaning friends and family members, and sometimes even the person undergoing the awakening. Having no context for understanding the nature of spiritual openings and the temporary disruptions which sometimes accompany them can lead to the compounding of an already difficult situation. This common occurrence is discussed more fully in the last two chapters of this dissertation.

Other experiences which are associated with the psychological aspects of the kundalini are of a more transpersonal nature. These are also listed by Greenwell under what she calls "paranormal" and "samadhi" experiences. The paranormal abilities sometimes reported after the awakening of kundalini are: precognition through visions or intuition; the visual or tactile sensing of auras; the gift of healing; remembering past lives; out-of-body episodes; feelings of synchronicity; illumined understanding of the scriptures; the sense of a larger reality; and, "psychokinetic" occurrences (interference with the functioning of electrical appliances, or things breaking or

³⁰Greenwell, 41-42.

moving when one is close to them).³¹

Samadhi can be defined as self-realization or having the experience of encountering the "supreme reality."³² As mentioned earlier in this chapter, this transcendent state is associated with the opening of the crown chakra. During samadhi experiences, one may also feel merged with another person, an object, or with nature. Some yogis think that these lower samadhi states are caused by the kundalini moving from the root to the throat chakra.³³ In general, these states are characterized by a moving beyond ordinary awareness, a falling away of the ego, and the perception that one is much more than the physical body.

Having given a general outline for some of the possible signs of kundalini awakening, I will now move on to present how this transformative process unfolded in the life of Philip St. Romain. Philip highlights incidents from his personal journey which demonstrate the interconnectedness of the physical, spiritual, and psychological dimensions of kundalini awakening. As he was facing each phase of the experience, he recorded the details in a personal journal.

The data were collected from the autobiographical material found in Philip's book Kundalini Energy and

³¹Ibid., 59-60.

³²Muktananda, 54.

³³Greenwell, 63.

Christian Spirituality: A Pathway to Growth and Healing.³⁴

I was also able to clarify points of information with Philip by the phone and mail. The data were then analyzed for themes common to the other cases and gathered into this case study presentation. An overview of his experiences is presented and brought into dialogue with the current literature on kundalini awakening. Conclusions for pastoral care and counseling follow.

Case Study -- Philip

At the age of twenty-three, after years of neglecting his spiritual life, Philip became active in the Catholic charismatic movement. With extensive training in the sciences, including an MS in biology and the coursework for a PhD, he deplored the lack of integration of science and religion he encountered in both the academic and religious communities, and went through a period of "deep, intellectual soul-searching."³⁵

After working as a lay minister, then as a substance abuse counselor, he decided to go out on his own as a counselor, lecturer, and free-lance writer. He prayerfully sought guidance in this decision in an eight-day silent retreat and said that God left it "entirely up to

³⁴Philip St. Romain, Kundalini Energy and Christian Spirituality: A Pathway to Growth and Healing (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1991).

³⁵St. Romain, 16.

[him]."³⁶ Philip followed his desire to return to the ministry even though he felt some anxiety about venturing into the unknown.

Philip extended his prayer time in the morning to one hour, during which time he read and reflected on the Scriptures, did stretching exercises, and rested in what he called the "Still Point," an inner space where he felt connected to God. A couple of times a week, he would extend this last half hour of silence, "sometimes speaking and listening to God in [his] thoughts, sometimes praising the Lord in tongues, sometimes doing nothing but breathing."³⁷ The effect of his prayer life was to move him lovingly toward others.

Philip was very active in his parish, particularly concerning social justice issues. At the end of the year when he decided to take a career turn back to the ministry, his wife became pregnant with their third child. This meant less income and more pressure on Philip. He sums up this period of his life: "Stress!"³⁸

Philip's experience of kundalini activity began the following spring with a sore throat. As mentioned, he had already begun to meditate and reflect, and found the inner space called the "Still Point," where he felt connected to

³⁶Ibid., 17.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid., 18.

God. Now, Philip experienced a change in his prayer life. He felt God's presence differently from the way in which he had experienced it before, lapsing into a "semitrance state" in which, if he closed his eyes, his visual ground would be tinted a shade of blue, sometimes with smudges of gold swirling in it.³⁹

These experiences gave Philip great joy, and he felt more physical energy as well. He says that he faded in and out emotionally, and felt as if he did not know himself, a change from his normally emotionally stable character.⁴⁰ Overall Philip was not troubled by these changes, however, and even regarded them as good. On June 25, 1986, he notes:

I had a vision before falling asleep of the sun shining through the branches of a forest....in retrospect, the simple vision of the sun was announcing the beginning of the next phase -- one that featured my first encounters with kundalini energy.⁴¹

As a trained biologist, Philip interpreted the phenomena that he was experiencing as his increased capacity to perceive brain wave patterns as they changed in his meditative state. He found that he perceived gold lights when he surrendered totally to God in prayer. These lights he regarded not as a direct message from God, but as a form of "visual glossolalia," a means of communicating with the

³⁹Ibid., 19.

⁴⁰Ibid., 20.

⁴¹Ibid.

divine spirit.⁴² Philip was disappointed when close friends, who were spiritual directors, could not help him understand what was happening. Philip took comfort in the fact that glossolalia was present during his meditation, knowing that the "Holy Spirit was somehow involved."⁴³

Philip sensed that he was changing emotionally, and became aware of a decrease in intensity in his familiar struggles with such emotions as worry and impatience. He reports that he felt more lighthearted and present in the moment, and recalls that poetry and wise sayings "[fell] into [his] consciousness like snow from the clouds." At that time, he wondered whether God might be transforming him into a spiritual guru.⁴⁴

By the following spring, however, the proverbs and lights were less frequent. Then, a dream of a tree splitting asunder and water flowing from its top and branches marked the beginning of a new phase that he came to look back on as the period of the "Asanas," a name derived from the yoga postures that he found himself assuming as this phase progressed.⁴⁵ Philip's initial outlook was positive; he believed that God was directing this process and had more, and even better, experiences for him to undergo. During this

⁴²Ibid., 22.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid., 22-23.

⁴⁵Ibid., 26.

time, Philip began to lose touch with his emotional history and his sense of identity.⁴⁶ He found traditional, mental prayer no help. Instead, he felt himself being drawn into a "black hole," a place with no feelings and few thoughts. It was then that Philip first experienced an urge to move his body into the "asanas," in which he squeezed his eyes together, made grimaces, and contorted his body.⁴⁷

Throughout this period, Philip was reassured by the writings of Bernadette Roberts, in which she shared her experiences of "no-self" and gave Philip a salutary interpretive framework. Inwardly assured, then, that he was on the right track, Philip gave himself over to the changes.⁴⁸ Within six months, the asanas were less frequent and he silently rested during prayer with periodic episodes of glossolalia and the reappearance of the purple and gold swirls. The black hole that Philip had experienced, he now interpreted as the "explosion of the Still Point," which was now gone.⁴⁹ All Philip's existential fear was gone, as well, a development that he took as evidence that

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid., 25-26.

⁴⁸Ibid., 26. Two books by Bernadette Roberts tell the story of her "contemplative journey." See Bernadette Roberts, The Path to No-Self: Life at the Center (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991); and The Experience of No-Self: A Contemplative Journey (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).

⁴⁹Ibid., 27.

he had surrendered completely to God, in keeping with the verse, "perfect love casts out all fear" (1 John 4:18).⁵⁰

From late 1987 through the summer of 1988, Philip experienced what he calls the "Crown Phase."⁵¹ He initially noticed a prickly sensation at the top of his head during prayer. He viewed this electrical sensation as a blessing from God, because of the state of peacefulness and clarity it brought with it. He was particularly grateful when he discovered that he could actually control this phenomenon and even induce it throughout the day because of the stress in his life at this time.⁵² His work as a psychotherapist and his roles as a husband and father were also enhanced by the energy, alertness, and empathy that accompanied this phase.

In early 1988, Philip states that the stress that had begun to develop in his abdomen during prayer was alleviated by the prickly pain in his head:

I would kneel, riveted to my stool, my intellectual self amazed at this turn of events, observing this unmistakable dialogue between abdomen and crown. Then something would give way in the abdomen, the crown would fizz with energy, and a delicious sigh would issue from the abdomen. Day after day this went on, with only intermittent episodes of glossolalia reassuring me of the Spirit's presence.⁵³

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Ibid., 28.

⁵³Ibid., 28-29.

During this period, Philip was awakened each night by the abdomen-crown interaction, and would sometimes weep without knowing the reason. He came to feel this experience was cathartic, and, in fact, felt himself at last rid of feelings of shame, loneliness and resentment that had plagued him for years.

Despite what he terms a "pressure-cooker environment," Philip says that he felt "light as a feather" and "tireless." Philip felt physically healthy; however, psychologically, he was disoriented, his ego dissolved, and he felt that his previous sense of identity was gone.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, Philip continued to be competent in handling his daily responsibilities. He was able to live in the moment and relinquish the past, and he lived with a hopeful openness to the future.

During this time, Philip became less able to conceive of God as a separate object. He thought of himself and God as branch and Vine, and he was unable to distinguish "where the life of the Vine and the life of the branch separated."⁵⁵

Still intent on determining his identity, Philip received an insight from his intuitive higher self telling him that Philip St. Romain was dead and that he should quit

⁵⁴Ibid., 29.

⁵⁵Ibid., 30.

seeking him.⁵⁶ Many questions remained, however, but his attempts to find a spiritual director to illuminate his experience were not fruitful, leading him to recollect the words of Bernadette Roberts, that "the contemplative must journey alone."⁵⁷

As the "Crown Phase" began drawing to a close, Philip began experiencing pain at the top of his head. At first the pain was "sweet and prickly," but gradually the sensation came to resemble a dagger having been thrust into his brain, along with a crab-like pressure.⁵⁸

Philip began to worry whether this phenomenon might result from a prayer addiction, as some of the symptoms that he experienced upon missing prayer mimicked the symptoms of his clients when they missed their drugs. Finding that only prayer was able to alleviate his pain, Philip spent an average of four or five hours daily on his knees. When he attempted to focus on a practical task, he risked "aggravating the dagger."⁵⁹ Other behaviors that might exacerbate the pain included reading, drinking alcohol, sex, and listening to emotional music.⁶⁰

Once again, Philip used the writings of Bernadette

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Ibid., 30-31.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Ibid., 32.

Roberts to sustain himself and took courage from the inspirational words that he had recorded during his earlier experiences.⁶¹ Zen, he also believed, helped somewhat, possibly because it discouraged intellectual concentration. He also participated in Holy Communion every day. Although he realized that ending his life might be the only way to end his pain, he did not view suicide as an option. Short of that recourse, Philip could only appease his "taskmasters" by not committing any "indiscretions," as he recalls:

What was needed now was complete relaxation, for the crown area was afire with pain, and the crab within was pulsating with pressure.⁶²

Philip finally experienced some relief after a dream in which he saw himself as a "little golden-haired boy" traveling with his parents to visit his grandparents. The dream may, he concedes, have been an actual memory, his "earliest experience of self-consciousness."⁶³ In Philip's dream, in any case, God was present in everything: the clouds, the people, the truck in which they were traveling, the house. Following the dream, he recalls, he was filled with so much joy that he could barely contain it, and he cried for hours.⁶⁴

The real turning point came a few days later when it

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Ibid.

occurred to Philip to view the pain in his head with "loving detachment." Then, remembers Philip,

Almost immediately, the dagger began to break up... uncoiling! Round and round it went, dancing on the top, then moving throughout the rest of the brain, de-pressurizing the sinus cavities, cleansing the eyes. "It's like a dance," I wrote. "The Spirit leads, and I follow."⁶⁵

With the relief from the crab pressure came a sense of liquid moving toward the crown, cooling the fiery tissues. It was accompanied by a whirling blue light within and the sensation of his skull being cold. Philip again had the vision of himself as a golden boy, "drinking greedily of living waters."⁶⁶

In retrospect, Philip interprets this phenomenon as the opening of the seventh chakra.⁶⁷ Once Philip again began to participate in the "restricted" behaviors, however, he began to experience a pain worse than the twisting dagger. From his prior experience, he was able to gain relief when he once again observed the prior restrictions.⁶⁸

During the ensuing month, Philip began to feel that a fluid was passing through the painful area and encountering blockages. He felt a "boring" sensation, that he likened to

⁶⁵Ibid., 33.

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Ibid., 34.

a dentist's drill penetrating his brain."⁶⁹ Philip's extensive knowledge of physiology led him to surmise that the pattern of the circulation of cerebrospinal fluid was changing so that new relationships with nerve cells could be created.

At about this time, Philip chanced upon a book about chakras and kundalini energy. Although he did not at that time make a direct connection between his experience and the information in the book, he notes that "a seed...had been planted."⁷⁰ When, not long afterward, Philip felt a breakthrough of the fluid within his brain, accompanied by a tremendous sense of power, energy, and warmth centered in his forehead, he recognized the forehead as the site of the sixth chakra in the Hindu system about which he had recently read.⁷¹

At first Philip experienced pleasant feelings of calmness and clarity, but, he says, it was his attempt to stay in the sixth chakra that caused his brain to contract and him to experience pain once more. Various perceptions of tingling in his brain and streams of energy in his head were accompanied by spontaneous breathing changes, in which he felt that his respiratory system had been taken over by some

⁶⁹Ibid., 34-35.

⁷⁰Ibid., 35.

⁷¹Ibid., 35-36.

great external force.⁷²

Philip also had some out-of-body experiences during this time, always during kundalini disturbances. At the same time, he also began corresponding with Jim Arraj, an author who wrote about mysticism and cross-cultural spiritual experiences. Jim told Philip that his experiences resembled those found in kundalini awakenings, and referred him to some writings on the subject. Arraj cautioned Philip that people had gone mad under the influence of this energy.⁷³ When he noted the same warning in the books on kundalini, Philip grew concerned that he might go insane.

This mental anguish ended when Philip realized that he was not to blame: he had not consciously sought out these experiences. At this time, his "higher self" consoled him directly:

The gentleness and reassurance brought by this unmistakable voice of transcendence led me to believe that it was either my guardian angel, or Christ Himself. Higher self promised to act as my guru since there was no finding any help for me in the Church. It promised to teach me to pray, to relax my brain, to grow in the experience, and to do everything that a Hindu yogi provided for the disciple.⁷⁴

During this time, a "kindly voice" began to help Philip, directing the kundalini energy upward through the sixth, then seventh, chakra. He felt as though the Dark

⁷²Ibid., 37.

⁷³Ibid., 38.

⁷⁴Ibid.

Night had finally passed.

The following eight months, what Philip calls the "emergence" phase, brought some positive changes.⁷⁵ Philip acquired the ability to "see" in two different new ways. The first new kind of seeing, wrought by the free movement of energy in the brow and crown areas, was "single seeing," in which the "third eye" participated in the process of vision along with the two sensing eyes. This seeing was accompanied by the perception that Philip was seeing with the center of the forehead and not the eyes.⁷⁶

The second kind of seeing arose from seventh chakra consciousness, and was "a kind of seeing from the top."⁷⁷ Since this state of seeing brings with it the sense that all things, including the perceiver, are in free-fall, concentration in this state is difficult. Philip is, therefore, fortunate in that he can "drop down" from this mode into the more focused and practical sixth chakra consciousness.⁷⁸

Both ways of perceiving reality are seen by Philip as relevant. In sixth chakra consciousness, Philip can experience the moment without intellectual judgment, providing a religious encounter in which everything is

⁷⁵Ibid., 39.

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Ibid., 39-40.

illuminated with "a new quality of brilliance."⁷⁹ Seventh chakra consciousness, by contrast, honors the mysterious ways of a creator who, moment by moment, by his will brings forth life out of nothingness. This latter state fosters "a profound reverence for God-as-creator and self-as-nothing without God."⁸⁰

Although Philip rejoiced in the return of his feeling self and his affective memory during this time, he found that both had been changed. Whereas his body and memories had been divested of emotional pain, such pain might recur if feelings were not dealt with immediately. Philip became the "golden boy" of his dreams, filled with wonder at God's pervasive presence and appreciative of divine Providence.⁸¹

Philip's experience of prayer was also changed. He now sensed a "pulsating white light" around his head, energizing his brain.⁸² The semitrance state in which he had prayed during the past three years now became uncomfortable, as was his practice of closing his eyes in prayer. Better was to be outdoors in nature with open eyes and alert senses, where Philip could "praise God in harmony with the sights and

⁷⁹Ibid., 40.

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹Ibid., 41.

⁸²Ibid.

sounds around [him]."⁸³ Philip recognized this experience as a change in location of the Still Point from within himself to without.⁸⁴

During the emergence phase, Philip came to accept that the old Philip was gone and that he could never return to his former lifestyle. He describes himself as a "marveling witness" to his own transformation, as he accepted the impersonal force of the kundalini as it changed him and forced him to listen to the "kindly voice" that is still with him.⁸⁵

Philip refers to the last major phase of his journey, which extends into the present, as the "regenerative stage," a time of renewal and experiencing life in balance. As he moved into this stage, he began to feel a new sense of being one with the "Dynamic Ground" and became aware of himself as "two bodies," one physical and the other energy, or astral. Philip says that as the kundalini process has progressed, the "astral or energy body has made its peace with the physical body, from which it has sprung, and now acts in the physical body as though it were a comfortable suit of clothes."⁸⁶

⁸³Ibid., 42.

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵Ibid., 39.

⁸⁶Ibid., 45.

Theoretical Analysis

In the area of personal and social adjustment, Philip appears to have successfully mastered the tasks of the third chakra. He has a satisfying family life, a history of job stability, and an active life in the community. He says that for years now he has felt emotionally stable.

Philip is also a charismatic Christian, so the possibility is strong that he has experienced spiritual openings in the fourth chakra and above. The phenomenon of speaking in tongues, for example, is probably associated with the opening of the fifth, or throat, chakra. His daily devotion to God in prayer and the I-Thou sense of relationship he has with God suggests that he has the necessary, healthy permeability to Ground energies as described by Nelson.

As in the case studies of T and Sister Helen, the beginning of Philip's story finds him actively pursuing spiritual growth. Philip has done this routinely for years through prayer and meditation; this is consistent with Muktananda's assertion that intense devotion toward God is one of the ways in which kundalini is awakened. Philip's first sign of kundalini awakening was a sore throat which lasted for three months. This is an interesting departure from the insights of classical yoga, which state that kundalini moves from the base of the spine, and the findings of Lee Sannella, which place its starting point in the legs.

One may surmise that Philip was already into the kundalini process long before the sore throat for two reasons: the beginning location at the fifth chakra and the fact that he was spirit-filled.⁸⁷

Whether Philip just noticed the kundalini when it manifested itself at the throat, or whether it actually started there, or whether he looked back at his sore throat experience and assigned meaning to it later becomes a moot point in light of the rest of his experience. He clearly had many of the typical signs of kundalini awakening. Physically, he experienced the kriyas, changes in breathing patterns, buzzing in the ears, headaches, semitrance states, lights, increased levels of energy, astral travel, electrical sensations at the crown, and feelings of lightness in the body.

Psychologically, Philip experienced mood swings, anxiety, depression, disorientation, and dissociation; these are all possible conditions caused by kundalini awakening according to Greenwell and Sannella. In the beginning of his story, Philip's remark that he had been emotionally stable for years implies that these conditions were not usual for him, but appeared as a result of the awakening. These

⁸⁷ Philip shared his thoughts with me on the possible connection between Shaktipat, the imparting of kundalini through the grace of the guru, and the baptism of the Holy Spirit. In Christian terms, the Holy Spirit could be understood as the kundalini energy of Christ. Every Christian who has had this experience then, would have kundalini energies at least partially awakened.

symptoms also were temporary, diminishing by the end of the kundalini process.

Philip was able to see the healing of his psyche taking place in spite of these difficulties. He says that his impulses of "worry, selfishness, and impatience" were becoming less pronounced as he learned to live more fully in each moment. His wife also saw positive changes taking place as he passed through this experience. She says that he became "more humble, more sensitive, less defensive and sarcastic."⁸⁸ He functioned well in his daily life. Overall, Philip's stance toward his hardships was one of hope. This was grounded in a faith that God was with him and that this painful process was of a growthful nature.

Philip describes spiritual changes as occurring in relationship to the psychological and physical ones. For instance, the explosion of the Still Point coincided with the disappearance of fear and the sense that he had totally surrendered to God. The Still Point eventually was experienced by Philip as completely outside of himself. This coincided with the change he felt in his style of communication and communion with God. At the beginning of his story, Philip experienced God privately in quiet meditation with his eyes closed. By the end of the story, he is encountering God in nature with his eyes open and alert senses, that is, he is aware of God's pervasive presence.

⁸⁸ Lisa Bellecci-St. Romain, quoted in St. Romain, 135.

His sense of I-Thou with God ultimately broke down as he became more aware of the God nature within him and in the world around him. This shift indicates growth into the seventh chakra where God is perceived as One with all things. At this center, one perceives that the universe is guided by the mysterious ways of the deity who brings forth life out of nothingness moment by moment. Philip's description of the knowledge received here is similar to the "pure knowledge" talked about by Muktananda: "everything is [perceived as] the play of God."⁸⁹ The cognition associated with seventh chakra opening is described by Philip as difficult to assimilate in everyday functioning. Fortunately, he is able to drop down to sixth chakra awareness where he can concentrate.

Philip's sense of the "pulsating white light" around his head during prayer is another change which he finds in his spiritual life.⁹⁰ So is the appearance of an inward spiritual advisor. This Higher Self informed him that the old Philip was dead. The death of the ego and the emerging predominance of the Higher Self is the theme of Philip's whole journey.

⁸⁹Muktananda, 43.

⁹⁰This is also a classic sign of seventh chakra opening according to our research. Muktananda says that when he first saw this light, he fell down. See Muktananda, 43-44. This was also part of T's conversion experience.

Conclusions for Pastoral Care and Counseling

The DSM IV offers several diagnoses which touch upon aspects of Philip's experiences. For instance, cyclothymic disorder addresses the mood swings which he exhibited in the phases of depression (such as weeping, feeling hopeless, having suicidal thoughts) and elation (such as feelings of being energized, thinking that God was instructing him directly and preparing him to be a spiritual guru).⁹¹ Philip's thought that God was communicating with him directly would probably be interpreted by many as a psychotic symptom caused by his mood disturbance.⁹²

If one were to approach the diagnosis of Philip's case with a focus on the fluctuating moods, the diagnosis of "mood disorder due to a general medical condition" (with mixed features) would be the most appropriate category.⁹³ That also allows pastoral care givers to take into account the physiological aspects of his case. Another possible diagnosis which honors the physical/psychological nature of Philip's situation is "personality change due to a general medical condition."⁹⁴

Some other categories which partially address Philip's case are obsessive compulsive disorder (prolonged prayer

⁹¹DSM-IV, 363.

⁹²Ibid., 379.

⁹³Ibid., 370.

⁹⁴Ibid., 174.

rituals), dissociative disorder (splits in feeling and thinking), and adjustment disorder (with depression).⁹⁵ The only diagnostic category which takes into account the meaning of Philip's journey is "religious or spiritual problem."⁹⁶

The syndrome known as kundalini awakening presently eludes all of the diagnostic categories available to clinicians. This means that people who are passing through these experiences are misdiagnosed and not receiving the appropriate care. Philip's struggle through his awakening, with little available help, is typical. Fortunately, he had a good emotional support system and the necessary ego strength to survive and, also, to reap the rewards of this evolutionary process. Others are not so fortunate. Itzak Bentov, for example, estimates that as many as 25-35 percent of all hospitalized schizophrenics may be victims of misdiagnosed kundalini awakening.⁹⁷

John Nelson remarks that the phenomenon of kundalini awakening has become increasingly recognized by psychologists and psychiatrists over the past ten years.⁹⁸ My hope is that the consciousness raising which has begun will continue until no one has to travel this road alone.

⁹⁵Ibid., 417, 490, 623.

⁹⁶Ibid., 685.

⁹⁷Greenwell, 42.

⁹⁸Nelson, 269.

CHAPTER 4

Spiritual Emergency: Definition and Diagnosis

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter and one of the main objectives of this dissertation is to introduce the concept of "spiritual emergency" to the field of pastoral care and counseling. The term itself is a play on the words "spiritual emergence." Emergence refers to the process of transformation which moves one toward spiritual and psychological wholeness and expanded levels of awareness.¹ Emergency describes those transformations which are characterized by psychological upheaval and disruptions in day to day functioning.

¹The common usage of "spiritual emergence" and "religious conversion," as found in the literature, makes these two terms interchangeable in many respects. Spiritual emergence and religious conversion both entail a turning toward spirituality or an encounter with the sacred, that is, of experiencing "dimensions of reality that give one's life and existence in general a 'numinous' quality." See Grof and Grof, Stormy Search, 40. Rambo's description of inner changes which often occur during conversion is closely aligned with the Grof's definition of spiritual emergence because it includes the possibility for profound shifts in the convert's values, perception of reality, and states of consciousness. For Rambo, changes found in conversion can involve several different kinds of turning: (1) from no faith system to a commitment of faith; (2) from one religious affiliation to another; or (3) from one orientation to a different one within the same belief system. See Rambo, Understanding Conversion, 2. Although these possibilities for turning are not spelled out in the literature on spiritual emergence, they certainly are not precluded by current definitions; they are, in fact, likely outcomes or correlates of spiritual emergence. The exception to this comparison is when religious conversion refers only to a person's change in religious affiliation, without the deep changes present in transformation.

This chapter includes a brief history of how the concept of spiritual emergency came into being and how it has been defined by experts in the field of transpersonal psychology. Also included is a discussion of the ten types of spiritual emergency as identified by Stanislav and Christina Grof. To lay a foundation for diagnostic considerations, criteria will be presented to aid the practitioner in discerning the differences found among the experiences of spiritual emergence, spiritual emergency, and regressive psychosis. The works of Stanislav and Christina Grof and John Nelson will be utilized in this discussion.

In the last section, the case study of Mineda will be presented and analyzed, drawing upon the insights offered by Grof and Nelson on the phenomenon of spiritual emergency.

Historical Perspective

The term "spiritual emergency" was coined by Stanislav and Christina Grof. Stanislav is a psychiatrist and researcher who has studied nonordinary states of consciousness extensively for over thirty years. Christina is a former teacher of yoga and has successfully weathered the experience of her own disruptive spiritual awakening.² Twenty years ago, the Grofs began traveling worldwide to give lectures and workshops on the topic of nonordinary states of consciousness. As they discussed their research

² Christina's and Stanislav's personal stories are found in Grof and Grof, Stormy Search, 8-27.

and personal experiences, they soon became aware that many people had undergone what they recognized as crises caused by transformational processes.³

These episodes were usually characterized by altered states of consciousness which caused one to lose his/her hold and ability to function within the world of consensual reality. These conditions, which the Grofs call "functional psychoses," could not be attributed to underlying physiological pathology as found in "organic psychoses."⁴ The Grofs also observed that if one was permitted to progress through, and to integrate, these anomalous experiences, he/she usually emerged with greater emotional and physical health, a deeper sense of connection with others and nature, and an increased awareness of cosmic consciousness.⁵

The Grofs found that, although these altered states of consciousness which were commonly a part of spiritual awakening were usually clearly distinguishable from organic psychoses, they were often being handled as psychotic episodes. They heard tragic stories about misunderstandings with friends and relatives, psychiatric labels, unneeded drugs, and hospital commitments. They also met other professionals in the mental health field who were frustrated

³Grof and Grof, Stormy Search, 3-4.

⁴Grof and Grof, Spiritual Emergency, 3-4.

⁵Grof and Grof, Stormy Search, 34.

with the limitations imposed upon them by traditional medicine and were seeking alternative treatments for their patients.⁶ In response to these needs, Christina founded the Spiritual Emergence Network in 1980, an international organization which provides support for people who are undergoing transformational crises.⁷

Definition of Spiritual Emergency

The concept of spiritual emergency has to be understood within the larger context of spiritual emergence. The Grofs maintain that spiritual rebirth, or spiritual emergence, is as natural as biological birth, and the propensity toward spirituality is part of "an evolutionary process" which leads one to higher levels of awareness of the sacred in one's personal life and in the world in general. The person engaged in this process may experience profound shifts in his or her perception of the world, and in ethical and moral ideals. These rebirths may occur over a long period of time and feel gentle; or, they may break in suddenly and feel overpowering and disorienting, resulting in crises known as "spiritual emergencies."⁸

The Grofs define spiritual emergencies as "critical and experientially difficult stages of a profound psychological

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid., 238.

⁸Ibid., 33-34.

transformation that involve one's entire being."⁹ Emotional intensity, visions, changes in the body and sensory awareness, and unfamiliar thoughts are characteristic of these crises. The spiritual awakening and opening which precede these "stormy experiences" induce states of consciousness which are "nonordinary" and disruptive to the individual's everyday functioning. Spiritual motifs are the focus of these episodes. Psychological death and rebirth, communication with mythological beings, feelings of union with the divine spirit or universe, and memories that seem to originate from past lives are some of the common themes found in these movements toward transcendence.¹⁰

The Grofs place the content experienced in spiritual emergencies into three general categories:¹¹

1. Biographical, in which the person reexperiences traumas that occurred earlier in his/her life and moves toward healing. Issues such as abuse, abandonment, and illness fall into this category.

2. Perinatal, in which themes of death and rebirth are present. The Grofs observe that these perinatal episodes resemble the phases of biological birth and appear to be a reliving of that event. Struggling to be free from something

⁹Ibid., 31.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Grof and Grof, Spiritual Emergency, 8-13.

which is restrictive can trigger birth trauma memories.

3. Transpersonal, in which distinctly mystical, spiritual, or transpersonal themes are present. This category contains such things as encountering mythological beings, demons, angels, and spirit guides. It can also include one's experiencing of geographically or historically removed events as if he/she is actually there. The Grofs observe that these remarkable episodes often involve one's acquiring of accurate, detailed knowledge of other cultures and times in history without ever having been personally exposed to them.

According to the Grofs, most transformational crises have precipitating factors which can be identified. Engaging in intense spiritual practices, such as drumming, whirling or chanting, is the most obvious catalyst for spiritual emergency; however, prayer and meditation can also set off these episodes. Some of the other likely instigators are events that cause physical trauma, such as surgeries, accidents, or disease. Under these circumstances, one can come face-to-face with the reality of his/her own finitude as the body weakens and psychological resistance is down. Childbirth, near-death encounters, and intense lovemaking are some other possible physical catalysts. Severe emotional loss, such as the death of a loved one or divorce, hypnosis, or drugs can also be catalysts for sending one into a spiritual emergency. Whatever the instigator may be, it has

the effect of turning the person inward and causing a shift in the balance between conscious and unconscious processes. Ordinary awareness becomes overshadowed by the deep forces of the unconscious.¹²

Types of Spiritual Emergency

The forms which spiritual emergencies can take are as varied as the personalities who experience them. The Grofs have outlined ten major categories which are useful for identifying and distinguishing one type from others, based on specific features. The Grofs remind the reader that these categories often overlap and are used only to serve as general guidelines. The categories and descriptions are as follows:

1. Shamanic crisis. Shamanism is an ancient cross-cultural sacred tradition and healing art which is still practiced today. The shaman's journey often begins with an "illness," which is marked by withdrawal and turning inward to face evil entities who subject the shaman to agonizing ordeals. During these dramatic inner disturbances, the shaman commonly undergoes a psychic death and a rebirth which allows him/her access into heavenly realms. When this ordeal is over, the shaman reenters society with improved physical and emotional health, an expanded awareness of reality in which the newly acquired spiritual insights are

¹²Grof and Grof, Stormy Search, 32-33.

incorporated into everyday living, and gifts of healing.¹³

2. Kundalini awakening. This topic has been discussed in depth in Chapter 3. One aspect which needs to be addressed is that, although kundalini is listed here as just one type of spiritual emergency, the possibility has been suggested that this potent force may play a role in causing all spiritual emergencies.¹⁴

3. Episodes of unitive consciousness. During these episodes, one's personal boundaries are transcended and one feels suspended in time and space. The Grofs remark that these experiences have a "very sacred quality" because one may feel that he/she has achieved union with God or the creative forces of the universe.¹⁵ Abraham Maslow coined the term "peak experiences" to describe these episodes.¹⁶

4. Psychological renewal through return to the center. John Weir Perry, a psychiatrist and Jungian analyst, describes this crisis which he calls the "renewal process." A person passing through this experience appears to get caught up in a cosmic struggle between the forces of Light and Darkness. Themes of death, destruction, afterlife, and the interplay of opposites occupy the psyche. Visions allow one to go back through history all the way to the beginning

¹³Grof and Grof, Spiritual Emergency, 14.

¹⁴Nelson, 271.

¹⁵Grof and Grof, Spiritual Emergency, 16.

¹⁶Ibid.

of the creation of the world; the person tries to undo all of the wrongs committed in the past. The person eventually moves out of the struggle into a period of resolution, during which he/she participates in a "sacred marriage."¹⁷ Archetypal symbols which represent the Self appear in the person's psyche and he/she is spiritually reborn. In time, the person realizes that he/she underwent a psychological drama which facilitated a transformation. Perry understands this process as moving one along the path of "individuation."¹⁸

5. Psychic opening. Paranormal phenomena, such as telepathy and precognition overwhelm and confuse the psyche. The person may have very accurate perceptions, but the constant bombardment of the psyche is extremely uncomfortable for him/her. If insights are blurted out indiscriminately, the people around the person feel ill at ease as well. These openings are often accompanied by out-of-body experiences, tendencies to feelings that one has lost his/her identity and taken on the identity of another, and "uncanny coincidences," what Jung called synchronicity. Grof points out that under different circumstances, these skills can be useful; the unpredictable nature and frequency of these occurrences, however, make them particularly

¹⁷Ibid., 17.

¹⁸Ibid.

frightening.¹⁹

6. Past-life experiences. The person feels that he/she has lived in another time and culture and has vivid, detailed memories about circumstances and other persons. The Grofs remark that episodes such as these probably inspired ideas about reincarnation and karmic patterns as found in India and parts of Asia influenced by Buddhism. These experiences feel especially disorienting to the person with the "rational" mind who has no context for them. These past-life impressions, or karmic patterns, can also cause problems for those who feel the need to act on them before they can do so with perspective. For instance, confronting another with whom one has unfinished business in a past life would not be received well by most.²⁰

7. Communication with spirit guides. During these episodes, a person may feel that he/she is being guided or taught by some otherworldly entity. The information that one receives from this spirit can be extremely accurate, proving to the recipient that the spiritual realm does exist. This can upset his/her present philosophy and worldview. On the other hand, the person receiving the messages can fall victim to self righteousness and a sense of superiority. The Grofs remark that many important spiritual teachings are claimed by their traditions to be the result of

¹⁹Ibid., 16-17.

²⁰Ibid., 19-20.

"channeling." During the experience of channeling, one is said to be relating messages from sources outside of his/her awareness. This can occur through automatic writing or speaking in trance states. The Koran and Book of Mormon are declared by their adherents to be the outcome of channeling.²¹

8. Near-death experiences. During these episodes, one often describes leaving the body and entering a dark tunnel which leads to a brilliant light. One has a chance to evaluate his/her life up to this point. He/she usually learns an important lesson about some aspect of life from the loving presence found in the light. This new information becomes a standard to live by when the person returns to the body and resumes his/her natural life. When these experiences seriously challenge one's previous idea of reality, they can send one into a spiritual emergency. Many have found these episodes positive and transformative. Raymond Moody's book Life After Life has helped to make the sharing of these experiences more acceptable in our culture.²²

9. UFO encounters. People who claim to have had these encounters often report having been abducted by aliens and subjected to intrusive, torturous procedures. The Grofs observe that this aspect parallels the agonizing ordeals

²¹Grof and Grof, Spiritual Emergency, 21.

²²Ibid., 21-23.

associated with shamanic illness. They also see a similarity between the flights in spacecrafts, which are sometimes a part of the encounters, and the imagery found in sacred literature, such as the "flaming machine" found in the book of Ezekiel. The Grofs refer to the literature of Jung on UFOs, which suggests that these experiences may actually be "archetypal visions."²³

10. Possession states. During these episodes, one feels as if he/she has been taken over by an evil spiritual entity who is in control of him/her. "Possessed" persons commonly engage in destructive behaviors, such as alcohol and drug abuse, and criminal acts, and they may feel severely depressed. The Grofs point out that the real nature of the disturbance, that the person feels under the control of an evil spirit, usually is not revealed until he/she undergoes some type of experiential therapy. At this time, a ritual of exorcism may be performed; the expelling of the demon may be accompanied by choking, vomiting, and physical frenzy. These experiences are often healing; they can lead to religious conversion as one seeks protection from evil by establishing a relationship with a strong, benevolent higher power. The Grofs observe that people who find themselves victimized by possession are usually scared and lonely. They may be aware of the evil presence and try to fight its influence. Other people understandably keep their distance. The Grofs

²³Ibid., 23.

maintain that these episodes have tremendous healing potential if the person receives the help needed.²⁴

These ten types of spiritual emergencies contain phenomena which no doubt challenge one's scientific view to the core. Many therapists will feel uncomfortable at the thought of dealing with a client who claims to be possessed or to have contact with a discarnate entity. The natural inclination is to look for a clear psychotic disorder in one who claims to have had an encounter with a UFO. Likewise, the idea that one can get information about past life experiences implies that reincarnation is a possibility, and this may challenge one's theological presuppositions.

Another way to look at this may be helpful. Before Raymond Moody's book on near-death experiences was published in the mid 1970s, the reports from people who talked about their dying and coming back were not taken seriously as they are today. Along the same lines, Scott Peck's book The People of The Lie lends credibility to the possibility of possession states. Perhaps time, and the receiving of new information from reliable sources, is what is needed to reshape opinions and worldviews.

The Grofs raise another important point. Most of the people who experienced these conditions did not go insane. They found that when their crises were handled with support and respect, they healed and moved on to greater levels of

²⁴Ibid., 24-26.

health and fulfillment. Here lies a good reason for taking the situation seriously regardless of its unconventional aspects.²⁵

The Grofs' outline of the various types of spiritual emergency can help one to identify the phenomenon. Their insights concerning the sources from which the contents of these experiences originate can aid one in selecting appropriate modes for intervention. While their materials are overall descriptive, the works of John Nelson are more explanatory and complement the Grofs' work. One may find it helpful to refer to both models when discussing particular aspects of spiritual emergency. I now turn to the theories set forth by John Nelson.

As discussed earlier, spiritual emergence is defined in Nelson's model as the self's gradual opening to, and assimilation of, the chakras through successively higher levels. In one who is healthy and mature, the process of spiritual emergence naturally unfolds without a disruption of the ego.²⁶ If, however, one is not well-grounded in the lower chakras, or the nervous system is not healthy, or one engages in spiritual disciplines which are too advanced for him/her, abrupt openings to these higher levels can affect the functioning ego negatively.²⁷ The result is an

²⁵Ibid., 26.

²⁶Nelson, 265.

²⁷Ibid.

"altered state of consciousness" (ASC). Nelson defines an ASC simply as "a sudden opening to a level or levels other than the one containing the self-center."²⁸

In Nelson's schema, "altered states" encompass a wide array of conditions, ranging from the major thought and mood disorders found in the DSM-IV (such as schizophrenia, bipolar, and borderline disorders) to drug induced changes and creative and mystical states.²⁹ Altered states are not necessarily psychotic, and what may be considered normal consciousness for one may feel bizarre and disorienting to another. For instance, the psychic who is used to functioning at sixth level chakra consciousness finds his/her altered state familiar and useful. In contrast, a person who finds him/herself reading the thoughts of others or having unpredictable flashes of precognition unexpectedly may feel confused and scared. These experiences can escalate into a crisis if not put into perspective.

How the person contains and expresses an altered state determines how he/she functions in the world and is perceived and treated by others. For instance, if a person in spiritual emergency feels out of control and crazy, and begins to verbalize received insights indiscriminately, he/she may be viewed as having a psychotic episode which is resulting in inappropriate behaviors. Nelson would probably

²⁸Ibid., 167.

²⁹Ibid., 18.

agree with this assessment, but rather than just dismiss the symptoms as psychotic and treat the person with medication, he would also assess the nature and value of this particular psychotic episode. This is what sets his approach apart from others. I will explain further.

For purposes of clarification, Nelson defines psychosis as an ASC which keeps one from integrating "sensory or extrasensory data" into forms which are acceptable within the broad limits of consensual reality, and which result in "maladaptive behaviors and social sanctions."³⁰ This definition of psychosis not only includes the major disorders found in DSM-IV but also what Nelson calls the "adaptive ASCs" (and the Grofs call "functional psychoses"). Spiritual emergencies and mystical states fall into this latter category.

Utilizing the chakra model, Nelson explains psychotic ASCs as the result of chakras opening out of phase; this situation causes one to be exposed to the yet unfamiliar energies of the ground. Specifically, if one encounters states of consciousness which are two or more levels removed from the one containing the self center, a psychotic ASC will most likely result.³¹ This occurs because the current functioning self cannot assimilate the incoming disparate information effectively, and instead tries to

³⁰Ibid., 3.

³¹Ibid., 302.

process it according to the systems of logic, values, and ethics available at the present level. The result is often disoriented thinking and inappropriate behaviors.

Nelson's model for understanding the mechanisms involved in producing the psychotic states present in mental illness and spiritual transformation is complex. He recognizes the validity of genetic predisposition theories regarding schizophrenic and manic depressive episodes as well as the theories which point to the significance of early childhood trauma.³² Any of these conditions, alone or combined, can make one vulnerable to the influx of ground energies.³³ Nelson points out that brain chemistry could be a possible underlying cause in some spiritual emergencies because long intense meditation can increase sensitivity to the same neurotransmitters indicated in schizophrenia and mania.³⁴ Whatever the underlying dynamic, the two factors which operate during these regressions are an increased influx of the ground energies which cause the chakras to

³²Ibid., 193.

³³For instance, increased norepinephrine levels during manic episodes cause an increase in consciousness; fluctuating dopamine and serotonin levels in the limbic system and frontal cortex of the schizophrenic can cause highs as found during mania, withdrawal and perceptual distortions, and the feelings of rapture experienced in mysticism. A weakly bounded self who has not developed a strong ego to withstand and integrate ground energies will also feel overwhelmed and disoriented. See Nelson, 124.

³⁴Ibid., 130.

open out of sync, and a breaking down of the ego.

One possible trajectory for a manic episode is illustrated as follows: A person predisposed to this condition starts to feel a pleasant sense of awareness and arousal in the early stages of mania; this is caused by the increased amounts of norepinephrine and the subsequent opening to the Ground.³⁵ Centered at the third chakra level, he may feel suddenly moved by compassion (fourth chakra) and give his school loan money to a homeless person. As chemical activity keeps increasing, the pleasant feelings begin to turn to ones of agitation as Ground energies pour in uncontrolled. If the fifth chakra opens, our manic patient may quit his job to pursue his creative impulses to write poetry without first considering how he will support himself; a sixth chakra opening may cause him to have episodes of precognition which, in his present disoriented and confused state, make him appear delusional to his friends; finally, the mystical states of the seventh chakra may leave him helpless to take care of his most basic needs.³⁶

Schizophrenic episodes present quite a different dynamic according to Nelson. In a person predisposed to this condition, the ego boundaries are exceptionally weak due to poor chemistry and inadequate social adjustment. The ego

³⁵Ibid., 120.

³⁶Ibid., 243.

begins to fragment when exposed to Ground energies. As it becomes weaker, more Ground energies can pour in; this sets up a vicious cycle.³⁷

To survive this ego death, the schizophrenic regresses in the service of the ego, either toward earlier modes of functioning from one's personal life or toward more primal evolutionary modes. When stressed, the predisposed self reverts back to earlier levels, taking fragmented pieces from the higher levels with it. For instance, the schizophrenic who has regressed to second chakra levels may feel a sense of universal love which causes him to give away his disability money.³⁸

Nelson distinguishes the regression in the service of the ego found in schizophrenia from the regression of the ego in the service of transcendence (RIST) found in spiritual emergencies. RIST is "a natural healing process" which is initiated by a wake up call from the higher chakras.³⁹ These disturbances threaten the ego in that it is exposed to unfamiliar Ground energies with the challenge to reintegrate the personality on a higher spiritual plane. The ego often fights back and tries to again seal off the relentless Ground energies, a situation which can lead to hallucinations and the inability to function in everyday

³⁷Ibid., 41-43.

³⁸Ibid., 166.

³⁹Ibid., 247.

life. The life-death battle which ensues can plunge one into a "malignant regression" or result in enlightenment.⁴⁰

According to Nelson, all of these experiences of upheaval described above exemplify the ultimate risk inherent in the spiritual journey and explain the many similarities found between mysticism and mental illness.⁴¹ To put this metaphorically, the yogi and the schizophrenic find themselves in the same waters. The yogi, who has devoted a lifetime to learning the spiritual path step by step, enters the water and gracefully swims. The schizophrenic, on the other hand, is not prepared or guided; whether he falls into the water or decides to jump in, he finds himself drowning.⁴²

How one ultimately handles the altered states discussed above is obviously the most crucial factor for determining the outcome of any disruptive episode. Ego strength, intelligence, self-concept, relationship with the Ground, and level of social support all come into play as one strives to reground him/herself and to integrate the new levels of consciousness in a meaningful and useful way. As discussed, what each person brings to these struggles is determined by such factors as genes, early upbringing, and

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Paraphrased reference to a quote by Joseph Campbell, cited in Nelson, 350.

life experience. All of these issues need to be considered before setting forth a diagnosis.

The next section presents the basic criteria offered by the Grofs and Nelson for identifying the differences found among experiences of spiritual emergence, spiritual emergency, and malignant psychotic regressions. These are illustrated with three clear examples, composites from various case studies and anecdotes. The case study of Mineda is then presented to show some of the challenges one may encounter during assessment and diagnosis. An analysis and interpretation follow.

Diagnosis of Spiritual Emergency

The Grofs offer the following general guidelines for distinguishing spiritual emergency from spiritual emergence. During spiritual emergence: One has an overall trust in the process and is accepting of and excited about the changes it brings. New ideas and insights are acquired gradually; they are welcomed and easy to integrate. Feelings of energy in the body are pleasant and comfortably contained; all positive experiences are accepted as gifts. Once in awhile, the person in spiritual emergence feels the need to talk to friends about his/her nonordinary states of consciousness, but life feels good overall.⁴³

By contrast, during a spiritual emergency: One does not like or trust the process. He/she feels ambivalent about new

⁴³Grof and Grof, Stormy Search, 37.

inner experiences when they arise, but is willing to cooperate with them under guidance. These inner experiences often feel powerful and overwhelming, making them difficult to integrate. The new insights pour in rapidly and their contents challenge one's old philosophical framework to the point of feeling threatening. The tremors and shaking in the body are uncomfortable and disruptive to everyday functioning. Positive experiences are hard to accept and seem undeserved and painful. One's identity is questioned as perceptions about the self and the world keep changing. Overall, these experiences are so unsettling that one needs to talk about them often to anyone, anywhere, just to gain relief.⁴⁴

Nelson provides some general guidelines for distinguishing between spiritual emergencies and regressive psychoses. Like the Grofs, he recognizes that the onset of spiritual emergency (SE) is often triggered by spiritual practice or some major stressor. The SE is usually accompanied by an ecstatic mood and possibly some anxiety; thought processes are only mildly disorganized; reality testing is good; and the level of social functioning has been good up until the onset of the ASC (altered state of consciousness). If voices are heard, they are of the "higher order," offering guidance and wisdom, as opposed to lower order voices which are abusive. The person in SE is aware

⁴⁴Ibid.

that something within has changed, and the person can see the value of the experience as relevant to his/her life. Paranoia is not usually part of SE, although one may feel afraid of the unknown. The duration of the ASC in SE is limited; in SE, the personal and social life are ultimately improved when the crisis is over.⁴⁵ In contrast, regressive psychoses are more likely to include destructive and enduring patterns, such as disorganized thought processes, lower order voices, and paranoia.

Following are three examples which illustrate the differences found among the phenomena of spiritual emergence, spiritual emergency, and schizophrenic regression.⁴⁶ The first account is from Chris, a fifty-four-year-old church leader and spiritual director who had an uplifting experience during worship one Sunday:

Christ's presence was so real during the service this morning. When communion was served, I felt such an outpouring of the love of God. Many of us in the church have been experiencing stressful times lately, and God seemed to draw near to us in an especially powerful way. When I received communion, it was as if Jesus was there himself offering the host to me. I was totally absorbed in the moment. Jesus was standing in front of me, radiant and smiling. When He told me to lay my burdens at the altar, my heart was filled with peace and joy. Several others had similar moving experiences during communion this morning which they shared with

⁴⁵Nelson, 266.

⁴⁶Elements in each of these examples have been taken from many different case studies and stories which illustrate the point. The composites were reviewed by Ros Goldstein, a practicing licensed clinical social worker and psychiatric nurse with 35 years of experience, for confirmation of the assessment and diagnosis.

me. What a wonderful blessing for all of us!

In the next account, Jan, a twenty-two-year-old college student tells her story to a pastoral counselor:

I know this is going to sound weird to you, but here goes.... A couple of weeks ago, I was taking a walk in the woods. I felt kind of lonely and I was also trying to make a decision about whether to go to graduate school. I began to wonder if God really cared about me and the things that were happening in my life. I heard a little voice inside me say, "Why wonder, why don't you just ask?" Well, that part didn't bother me too much, because often when I'm thinking about things I hear a little dialogue in my mind. I sat down on the grass and tried to pray. I hadn't prayed in so long that I didn't know how to start. I sat for awhile with my eyes closed and felt very peaceful. A gentle wave of energy moved through my body and my heart was filled with love and warmth. I began to cry, because I felt so secure and content. I don't think I've ever felt anything so wonderful before.

When I opened my eyes, I saw a man wearing a bright white robe. He was so radiant that I could just about see through him. At first, I was startled, but when he said, "Don't be afraid; I love you with an everlasting love," I felt the same strong feeling of peace that I had experienced when my eyes were closed. The image of the man faded, and I sat there for awhile longer. I was peaceful, happy, and content. When I got up to leave, my body seemed lighter and I felt carefree. I was somehow very different.

Then I got really confused. I didn't know what happened to me. Was I making this up? Was my mind playing tricks on me? As I was going home, I walked past the cemetery where my father is buried. Close to his grave is a large mosaic picture of Jesus with the saying "I am the resurrection and the life." When I saw those words, my heart felt full of love again and I had the sense that a bright light was filling my body. It was the weirdest sensation, but I wasn't really afraid at the time. I continued walking, sensing the light and thinking about the vision I had in the woods. When I passed people on the street, I felt love and compassion for them even though I didn't know them. I also wondered if they could see the light coming from my body, because it seemed so strong within me.

I told my family and some friends about what happened and they looked at me like I was strange. I think they may be right. I've thought about going to church, but I'm afraid of what will happen. This whole

experience has really changed me. I'm not sure of who I am anymore. Sometimes I stay awake at night worrying about whether I'm losing my mind. Now I think that the man I saw in the woods may have been Jesus. What do you think?

In this last account, Brian, a twenty-six-year-old man in a half way house talks of his other worldly encounters:

Since I was seventeen, George has been coming to visit me. He usually wears a long white robe and has a scowl on his face. I never know when he is going to appear. Sometimes he comes into my room when I am sleeping and tells me that I will go to hell because I am so evil. This makes me cry and I tell him to leave, but he won't. Instead, he puts hot coals on my pillow to remind me of what will happen if I don't behave. I am afraid of going to hell.

Lately, George has been appearing more often. He sprinkles cosmic dust on my head so that I can hear other people when they are talking about me. He says that these people are evil too and that we will all be in hell together.

All three of these people have had visionary experiences. Traditional training for psychotherapists would often regard these encounters as hallucinatory episodes and would advise antipsychotic medication. In the third case, this is the appropriate treatment. Brian has had a long history of pervasive cognitive distortions punctuated with auditory and visual hauntings which keep him locked in a world of terror. His hallucinations are of the lower order, that is, they are commanding and abusive. He functions at second chakra level consciousness; this is especially obvious in the punitive parent God image he has. This understanding and emphasis of God as the rewarder of good and punisher of evil is characteristic of young children (second chakra level).

Brian resides in a group home, because he has not been able to attend to his basic needs. He functions best in an environment which provides structure and supervision. When he tells his stories about "George," he is not aware of the effect this has on others. In other words, he is not cognizant of how his perceived realities deviate from general consensual reality. Given the overall extended poor level of functioning, a diagnosis of malignant psychotic regression is most likely appropriate.

In comparison, Chris functions personally and socially at a much higher level of competence (third chakra). She has raised two children, who are now self-reliant young adults, and she has a healthy, loving relationship with both of them. She provides for herself and is a respected church leader and main organizer of an outreach to the poor and homeless in her community (fourth chakra). Chris' visionary experience would not normally come to the attention of mental health professionals. It complements her religious belief system and is not interfering negatively with her everyday functioning; therefore, she feels no need to seek any type of "help" for it. In fact, her encounter with the man she identified as Jesus was very refreshing and edifying. For her, it was a much appreciated moment of transcendence (perhaps associated with the seventh chakra). This exemplifies spiritual emergence.

Jan's case presents yet another reaction to a visionary

encounter. Her ambivalence about it is clear. She prefaces her story with a warning that it is "weird," demonstrating that she is aware of its conflictual aspects with consensual reality. Her thoughts and feelings are congruent. Although she is concerned and anxious about her experience, she is also aware of its special nature and potential. She speaks of the experience with a sense of awe and wonder, communicating to the listener that she respects the mysteries of the sacred and acknowledges the possibilities for human transformation.

Jan's visionary encounter and resulting altered state of consciousness have put her into a state of spiritual emergency. She said that the experience itself was not uncomfortable. In fact, it was pleasant, making her feel "peaceful, happy, and content." The unfamiliar aspects of the altered state scared her when she thought about them in comparison to the reality she had known before. The people she shared her experience with afterward reinforced this sense of uneasiness with their negative response. Because the new information contained in Jan's experience was ego dystonic, she decided to resist it rather than to assimilate it.

From the perspective of transpersonal psychology, Jan's experience would be understood as a spiritual opening, marking the beginnings of the process of spiritual emergence. While walking through the woods, Jan began to get

in touch with that part of herself that yearned for God. According to the chakra model of human development, the level of functioning achieved prior to spiritual awakening involves the first three chakras which are concerned with mastering the tasks of the everyday world.⁴⁷ In other words, prior to her prayer, Jan was familiar with issues of basic security and survival (first chakra), pleasure, relationships, sexuality, and creativity (second chakra), and personal power and social identity (third chakra). When she prayed, she became open to the energies of the Spiritual Ground and began to move into the state characteristic of fourth chakra consciousness.

In Nelson's model, Jan would be recognized as being in the beginning stages of regression in the service of transcendence (RIST). Intervention in Jan's case involves helping her to accept the positive message of love and support found in her vision, thus stabilizing her at this new level so that spiritual emergence can continue.

The above examples represent cases in which diagnosis is fairly straightforward. In the following case study of Mineda, one encounters some of the complexities which can arise while trying to identify the underlying dynamics of a transformational crisis. This case was derived from an

⁴⁷See Grof and Grof, Stormy Search, 34; and Nelson, 259-60.

autobiographical account.⁴⁸

Case Study -- Mineda

In her autobiography, Mineda writes that she quit high school at eighteen, was sad and pessimistic at twenty, and celebrated her twenty-first birthday in a mental hospital. While there, she judged herself as a "dynamic failure" and a misfit, and decided that religion was her only recourse.⁴⁹

Although Mineda was disillusioned by the Church, she did not reject Christ and found the Bible a source of comfort. Still she noticed that many passages were contradictory and confusing. For instance, she noticed that Paul's conversion is described three times in Acts, each in a different way. Although Mineda could not accept the scriptures as infallible, she considered them a source of inspiration. She therefore wanted to understand the Bible and the mysteries it described (Cor. 4:1). To know the "meaning" of God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, and such concepts as love, good and evil, and heaven and hell became important to her.⁵⁰ At the same time as she sought God in faith, she began to explore the viewpoints of other disciplines, and

⁴⁸This case study is taken from Mineda J. McCleave, "Christian Mysticism and Kundalini," found in White, Kundalini, Evolution and Enlightenment (New York: Paragon House, 1990), 403-21. Used by permission. The original article was written especially for Kundalini, Evolution and Enlightenment.

⁴⁹McCleave, 403.

⁵⁰Ibid., 404.

she began to realize the value of the insights gained from such topics as yoga, mysticism, metaphysics, reincarnation, and hypnotism.⁵¹ She beseeched God for wisdom and understanding.

Mineda eventually turned to the occult literature that some religious books had cautioned against. Before reading these materials, however, she prayed to God for guidance and protection as she read them. She was surprised to find that rather than evil, "occult" meant "hidden" or "esoteric," and she was encouraged when many of the authors suggested a more comprehensive reading of the Scriptures.⁵²

Mineda began to walk in the faith that God would honor her prayers for the "hidden wisdom which God ordained before the world" (Rom. 2:7) and understanding. She held on to the promises found in the scriptures: "Seek and you will find" and "You will find me when you search for me with all of your heart." Although Mineda expected to find something, she was unsure of what it was. Aware that all the major religions were founded on love, she devoted herself to serving God through loving and serving humankind. She describes her first few years as "delightful," filled with happiness, optimism, and loving relationships.⁵³

Believing Jesus' assurance that the kingdom of God was

⁵¹Ibid., 403.

⁵²Ibid., 405.

⁵³Ibid.

within, Mineda turned inward and spent much of her time in prayer. She accessed a "much deeper, or higher, part of [herself] than [she] had expected" and became aware of a "sensual feeling" as she continued in her meditative prayer. Overall, Mineda felt loving, happy, and peaceful, and she wanted others to experience this same joy.⁵⁴

Mineda's consciousness began to expand, her sense of intuition heightened, and she began to experience episodes of mental telepathy and of being outside her body. She felt that she was starting to lose touch with the world around her, and the mood cycles from years before again began to recur. Feelings of anxiety, euphoria, and depression alternated in this period in her life. She was amazed when suicidal thoughts now arose during prayer, because her meditative practice had always been so peaceful. Feelings of absent-mindedness along with an attendant physical, emotional, and mental chaos compelled Mineda to quit her job. She pulled away from society and depended on her family for care and support.⁵⁵

Mineda's prayers of praise and thanksgiving soon deteriorated to "frantic spiritual cries for help."⁵⁶ Her mental agitation intensified, and she perceived her "dark night of the soul" as "a cross" she was supposed to bear.

⁵⁴Ibid., 406.

⁵⁵Ibid., 406-07.

⁵⁶Ibid., 407.

Although Mineda recognized that hers was a spiritual journey, and accordingly she did not want to seek psychiatric care for her mental agony, she was admitted to the local psychiatric hospital three times during her ten-year struggle. Finally, in the last year of this ordeal, repeated bouts with migraine headaches forced her to concede that her life was out of control, and she decided to seek help from a psychologist.⁵⁷

The psychologist that Mineda found, however, did not "understand or approve of" her path of religious seeking. This situation proved very stressful for Mineda and hurled her "back into the depths of [her] being"; she sought help from God in prayer. For two "terrifying and enlightening" months, she had a fever, her lungs were dry, she lacked interest in food, and she had difficulty sleeping. Then, one day during prayer, she felt an energy current move through her left foot, up the leg and lower trunk, into the top of her back. This sensation lasted for four days and was accompanied by an extreme heat in her body which others could actually feel if they placed their hands close to her head.⁵⁸

Mineda turned to the Bible, and, in particular, the Psalms, for comfort, convinced that God was "writing his

⁵⁷McCleave, 407.

⁵⁸Ibid., 408.

laws in [her] inward parts."⁵⁹ Mentally, she felt "disoriented" and "deluded," and her mind seemed hyperactive. Physically, she experienced anorexia, headaches, trembling, fever accompanied by chills, nausea, and vertigo. Her emotions ranged from euphoria to anxiety, bewilderment, and despair. Her reflection in the mirror seemed to have a "strange, wild look." Fearing that people would perceive her "schizophrenic-like behavior," Mineda would not leave her home. At one point, she believed that she had died, an idea that brought her feelings of peace.⁶⁰

During this time, Mineda read Gopi Krishna's account of his own kundalini awakening. She found significant parallels between his physical, mental, and emotional experiences and her own. Although she wanted to do more exploring on the topic of kundalini awakening, her stress level was such that she could only pray. Yet she was convinced that her experiences were actually working for her good, despite their outward unpleasantness. Mineda also began to understand that her practice of deep meditative prayer was instrumental in stirring up kundalini energy, and that her many symptoms pointed to this peculiar syndrome.⁶¹

At this time, Mineda's therapist decided that he could

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Ibid., 408-09.

⁶¹Ibid., 409-10.

no longer work with her because of all of the symptoms she was exhibiting. After praying for deliverance and assistance, Mineda was led to an understanding, "caring," and "open-minded" Christian psychiatrist who manifested a sincere desire to help without the need to discount Mineda's interpretations of her experiences. This man seemed unafraid of kundalini or the occult, and was even willing to read books by Sannella, Gopi Krishna, and others in order to understand Mineda's case more fully. Although he reminded Mineda from time to time that she was not a yogi, her psychiatrist did encourage her to proceed on her spiritual path by finding the common elements within her experiences and those of others, such as the mystics.⁶²

Mineda makes clear the value of the therapy she received from this compassionate, open-minded psychiatrist, who accepted her and "allowed [her] to grow." She does not speak of the abatement of her symptoms or share any more personal experiences about her journey from this point on. In closing paragraphs of her account, she instead discusses the insights which she gained from her extensive reading in the area of kundalini. In studying the Scriptures and accounts written by the mystics, Mineda encountered numerous references to the experience of light and fire: John the Baptist's prophecy that Jesus would baptize "with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Mat. 3:11), the writer of Hebrews use

⁶²Ibid., 410-11.

of "a consuming fire" as an epithet for God (Heb. 12:29), Brother Lawrence's prayer that God would sustain him by his power "lest the fire of [God's] love consume him," and John of the Cross's reference to "God's fiery probe" in the core of his soul and the "heat and light" he sensed in his body as a result of God's action upon him.⁶³ These examples represent only a brief sample of her many insightful contributions.

Mineda continues to do her research and correspond with others on the topic of kundalini awakenings. After Mineda read an account of my story (case study of T), I shared that there appears to be a connection between the amount of trauma one experiences in early childhood and the magnitude of the spiritual emergency. She agreed that on the basis of her own experience and what she knew of the experiences of others who have had radical spiritual awakenings, the presence of trauma in childhood appears to be commonplace. This is the only information I have about that time in her life.

Mineda's case study is utilized in spite of some gaps in information, because of its value for the discussion of the complexities involved in diagnosis and intervention. In the following sections on analysis and interpretation, insights are shared on some of those areas of difficulty.

⁶³Ibid., 412-13.

Theoretical Analysis

In the first part of her story, Mineda shares that she quit high school at age eighteen. Although she doesn't say why she quit, one can probably assume that something significant happened which caused her to do this. The fact that she is a bright woman is obvious from her research and writing, so one can rule out lack of ability as a reason for leaving school. A therapist would do well to explore this with Mineda, because her answers would most likely contain valuable information concerning her basic way of coping with stress, her family dynamics and her level of self-esteem.

Mineda shares that at age twenty (two years after leaving school), she was sad and pessimistic. Had this sadness and negativity been ongoing since her school days? If so, one could possibly make a diagnosis of Dysthymic Disorder, because the symptoms of low self-esteem and feelings of hopelessness appear to have been present for at least one year.⁶⁴ One can also consider Major Depressive Disorder as a diagnosis; Mineda's symptoms may have reached this severity in that she was hospitalized the following year.⁶⁵

Mineda does not reveal the diagnosis she was given when she was twenty-one. From her story, one might surmise that she was diagnosed schizophrenic, because she says that she

⁶⁴DSM-IV, 345-49.

⁶⁵Ibid., 327.

was afraid to go out of her home "for fear that someone would notice [her] schizophrenic-like behavior."⁶⁶ Given the scarcity of information, the actual diagnosis cannot be known with certainty. If this diagnosis is accurate, it is possible that the difficulties causing her to quit school were part of the prodromal phase, characterized by "loss of interest in school or work and social withdrawal."⁶⁷

Another important point to consider here, however, is that Mineda was hospitalized around 1960, a time when the diagnosis of schizophrenia was used loosely as a category, and perhaps was applied to Mineda. Mineda's reference to mood cycles during which she felt anxiety, mental agitation, euphoria, and depression points strongly to a bipolar disorder.

When Mineda was in the hospital, she judged herself very harshly as a "dynamic failure" and felt that she could only go "her own" way. She also makes other statements which reveal a strong negativity toward herself and others: she felt like a "misfit;" she felt "an aversion toward the world."⁶⁸ Mineda presents the picture of isolating in her emotional pain and it appears that she had turned much anger inward. This is not surprising given the time of her first hospitalization (1960). Mental patients were often treated

⁶⁶McCleave, 409.

⁶⁷DSM-IV, 282.

⁶⁸McCleave, 403.

as incompetent children and the stigma attached to mental illness then was especially shame-inducing. What did Mineda do with all of the pain she must have been carrying if she felt it necessary to isolate?

It appears that Mineda began her spiritual journey with many unresolved feelings. Shame, disillusionment, anger, and loneliness were carried into her religious experience, as well as her deep longings for spiritual wisdom and a relationship with God. If Mineda was predisposed to bipolar disorder or schizophrenia, her age at the onset made her particularly vulnerable to disruptive episodes. The age of onset for both of these disorders is usually in adolescence or early adulthood. Mineda also made brief reference to childhood trauma. If this is the case, her grounding in the lower chakras was probably poor and functioning healthily in relationships was difficult. Any of these factors can make one vulnerable to the impact of spiritual energies; Mineda apparently had all of them.

Mineda moved forward in pursuing spiritual growth and functioned at third and fourth chakra levels for a few years. She had a job and says that her relationships were characterized by a love that she wants everyone to experience. Eventually, her meditative prayer opened her to a deeper part of herself. She reports a "sensual feeling" (second chakra). Her consciousness expanded and she had episodes of mental telepathy and out-of-body experiences

(sixth chakra). Mineda reports that her troubles with mood swings began again.⁶⁹ This is not surprising. Openings into the higher chakras without the adequate support of the lower can plunge one into spiritual emergency or a manic ASC. At that point of crisis, a common intervention is to get the person to stop meditation. If a sense of grounding cannot be restored, Nelson says that he uses medication very carefully. The ideal is to help the person transform the energies from chaotic to workable forms.⁷⁰ Intervention strategies are discussed more fully in the next chapter.

Mineda's upheaval caused her to quit her job and turn to her family for support. She did not seek professional help because she thought the spiritual nature of her experience would be discounted. This was exactly what happened ten years later. The poor response from her therapist caused her to rely even more on herself and her spiritual resources. The combination of Mineda's weakened ego and increased spiritual practice appears to have been the catalyst for the kundalini awakening.

Mineda's list of symptoms have been recognized as possible signs of kundalini awakening: the electrical current starting in the left foot, heat in the body, chills, nausea, headaches, and mood swings.⁷¹ She describes the

⁶⁹Ibid., 406.

⁷⁰Nelson, 409.

⁷¹Greenwell, 32, 117.

period in which she endured these symptoms as "most terrifying, yet enlightening."⁷² Her reading of Gopi Krishna's account of his disruptive kundalini awakening helped her gain perspective. She was able to see many parallels between his story and her own, and began to understand that the deep meditative prayer she engaged in was instrumental in stirring up the kundalini energies. She also prayed often and believed that these experiences were actually working for her good.

This difficult situation proved to be a significant turning point for Mineda. She was able to connect meaningfully with a new therapist who allowed her to be herself, she found a way to understand her journey through the writings of Gopi Krishna, and she became excited about doing research on kundalini awakenings. She emerged from her experiences with a stronger, more universal faith and a new understanding and wisdom which she has shared with many.

Conclusions for Pastoral Care and Counseling

Mineda's story challenges the pastoral counselor with some of the difficulties in diagnosis which can arise when other conditions are present during spiritual awakening. Greenwell points out that symptoms such as bodily temperature changes, mood swings, and eating disorders can manifest themselves during times of stress, physical and mental illness, meditative practices, or unusual brain

⁷²McCleave, 408.

stimulation. Because kundalini energy cannot yet be scientifically verified, one has no way of knowing that the phenomenon is taking place.⁷³

When a person with no previous history of mental or physical illness experiences symptoms associated with kundalini awakening, one can say with more certainty that an awakening has occurred; the case of Philip is revealing in this regard. On the other hand, Mineda's case has confounding variables, such as her prior history with mood swings. Using the current model found in DSM-IV, Mineda probably would have been diagnosed as having bipolar disorder and given medication to control the symptoms. This diagnosis is plausible. However, she may very well have experienced kundalini awakening; in fact, her situation was conducive to it.

John White, for example, observes that a way in which kundalini can be activated is through constantly thinking about one thing.⁷⁴ Mineda withdrew from others and focused on understanding the mysteries of God. Kundalini awakenings are also facilitated by practices which weaken egoic defenses.⁷⁵ Mineda's ego was already in a weakened state when she engaged in her deep searching. Her prolonged intense focusing in interaction with her weak ego structure

⁷³Greenwell, 68.

⁷⁴White, 355.

⁷⁵St. Romain, 128.

could, theoretically, have awakened the latent energies. Mineda's symptoms became very pronounced while she was seeing the therapist who negated her experiences, a situation which can tear at any ego; she turned to prayer and focusing on God and the scriptures as her main support, thus intensifying her one-pointed thinking.

One possible way for understanding Mineda's case is that she was predisposed to bipolar disorder and experienced kundalini awakening. Nelson's model is helpful here because it allows one to understand situations such as Mineda's from a much broader viewpoint, one which takes into account all of the possible sources contributing to the disturbance. The influx of energy could have been the catalyst for a full-blown bipolar episode. Interestingly, Nelson understands the manic ASC as a type of "genetically programmed spiritual emergency" because the manic phase is commonly accompanied by the opening of higher chakras more than one level removed from the one which contains the self center.⁷⁶ In Mineda's case, identity was centered in the third and fourth chakras; the intrusions from the sixth chakra precipitated the mood swings. Drawing from Nelson's insights on diagnosis and using the DSM-IV, one may conclude that Mineda's situation met the criteria for a mixed bipolar episode; it was also a spiritual emergency.⁷⁷

⁷⁶Nelson, 301.

⁷⁷DSM-IV, 335.

To further clarify the connection between kundalini activity and mental illness, Bonnie Greenwell's insights are helpful. She does not believe that kundalini causes psychosis, nor does she think that spiritual themes manifested in a psychotic break are necessarily indicative of kundalini awakening. It is possible, however, for the two experiences to occur at the same time due to weak ego boundaries, as has been suggested in the case of Mineda. Greenwell also observes that kundalini symptoms are often mistaken as signs of mental illness. This situation leads to inappropriate treatment strategies which can be detrimental to the patient by causing "long-term ego fragility" and increasing the potential for a psychotic break to occur.⁷⁸

Mineda's story raises the issue of how therapists often handle cases in which spiritual themes are present. She avoided mental health professionals because she knew that the spiritual aspects of her experience most likely would be labeled as delusional and dismissed. A setback resulted from Mineda's encounter with her first therapist. On the other hand, a real healing began when she was able to find a therapist who honored all of the facets of her experience.

In closing, some additional insights about Nelson's approach are offered. Nelson's model is especially valuable to the therapist who desires a realistic conceptual framework in which to understand and treat those cases which

⁷⁸Greenwell, 42.

manifest both signs of mental illness and spirituality. He takes a middle of the road position between the stance of orthodox psychiatry, which would understand Mineda's case as only mental illness, and anti-psychiatry, which may view Mineda's situation as originating solely from spiritual sources.

Nelson's approach to assessment and diagnosis honors the findings of traditional medicine as well as the insights offered by the transpersonal school. While interviewing a client, he gathers the usual data concerning duration of the regression and how the regression began. He asks whether the onset was sudden or insidious; what is the history of ASCs in the person or family; whether or not hallucinations are present; and if so, what is their content. In addition, Nelson checks for evidence of any kundalini phenomena and asks about physical blockages, and about any paranormal phenomena and how they are being controlled.⁷⁹

Another contribution from Nelson is that his use of the chakra system allows one to see which levels of the psyche have been activated and which ones need to be strengthened. For instance, Mineda could not assimilate sixth chakra awareness, so she needed to strengthen the lower chakras. She had unfinished business from the first two chakras as a result of unresolved childhood trauma, she needed to continue learning the social skills required at third chakra

⁷⁹Nelson, 398.

level, and she was learning to gradually contain and incorporate awareness from the higher levels. The chakra system actually provides pastoral counselors with maps for intervention.

CHAPTER 5

An Integrative Approach to Psychotherapy
with Clients in Spiritual Emergency

We cannot move forward spiritually unless we are also willing to deal completely with our personal psychology, especially developmental issues from early childhood that pattern the way we perceive and react to the present.

Emma Bragdon, The Call of Spiritual Emergency

Introduction

In 1932, during a seminar on the psychology of Kundalini Yoga, Carl Jung told the story of a fifteenth century Christian monk who "got into his unconscious."¹ The monk sees himself as journeying in the mysterious Black Forest. He gets lost, and a wolf appears. The monk is scared at first, but then he follows the wolf to a spring and drinks, which Jung interprets as "an allusion to baptism." Later, the monk approaches ancient Roman ruins and begins to quote the "peculiar symbolic inscriptions" which he encounters there. This scenario feels uncanny to him. Gripped with fear, he attempts to turn back, only to find that a dragon (identified by Jung as kundalini) is blocking the way out.²

Jung goes on to say that the monk is in this predicament because he was seized by the "divine urge," that

¹C. G. Jung, The Psychology of Kundalini Yoga: Notes of the Seminar Given in 1932 by C. G. Jung, ed. Sonu Shamdasani, Bollingen Series, 99 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 21.

²Ibid.

is, kundalini.³ The monk had "something peculiar" in him, a "leading spark" that caused him to go through the waters and on to the next unfamiliar place.⁴ Jung interprets kundalini in psychological terms as "that which makes [one] go on the greatest adventures." Once these journeys are begun, it is impossible to go back without finding that life has "lost its flavor," that the adventure has gone out of it, for "it is this quest which makes life livable, and this is kundalini."⁵

This story told by Jung and his interpretation capture the essence of the spiritual quest. To embark on the journey with sincerity requires that one be courageous, open to change, and willing to explore the unknown. As has been shown in the four case studies, the journey itself is often fraught with dangers as well as opportunities for growth and enlightenment. Also apparent is the confusion and pain which can result if one does not have a map or some kind of guide to help him/her travel through this uncharted terrain.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a map for the journey of transformation marked by crisis. The topic is approached from the two angles of theory and practice. In the first section, the possible stages of spiritual transformation are outlined along with some basic strategies

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

for intervention suggested by Roberto Assagioli, Hillevi Ruumet, and John Nelson.

The second section presents an overview of physical, emotional, cognitive, spiritual, and social difficulties that may beset individuals undergoing spiritual emergency and discusses some of the ways in which the pastoral counselor might assist such persons. The works of Bonnie Greenwell, Emma Bragdon, and John Nelson are utilized as the main sources. The above theorists and practitioners have strong backgrounds in the transpersonal school of thought as well as in conventional psychologies. Their integrative approaches are invaluable for understanding and helping people who are grappling with the issues of spiritual emergency.

Maps for the Journey

In this section, a map for the spiritual journey marked by crisis is presented. In his book Psychosynthesis, Roberto Assagioli provides a general outline of the difficulties which may arise at different stages of spiritual awakening. As I present Assagioli's stages, I will bring his insights into dialogue with those of John Nelson and Hillevi Ruumet, a clinical and transpersonal psychologist who utilizes the chakras to understand and facilitate psychospiritual development. The interaction between Assagioli's stage model and Ruumet's and Nelson's developmental model offers a large perspective from which to view transformational crises.

Brief references to the works of Anton Boisen, Bonnie Greenwell, Christina Grof, and Stanislav Grof are made to further elaborate or expand the insights of Assagioli, Nelson, and Ruumet. Examples are taken from the case studies found in the first four chapters of the dissertation.

In "crises preceding the spiritual awakening," Assagioli begins by describing how the "ordinary" person approaches life. He/she is not generally concerned about life's meaning or purpose, but rather accepts life as it is. To satisfy personal desires and ambitions is the goal; life in the tangible world is the only reality, and it is good.⁶ Family and social roles are carried out dutifully and one can feel self-assured knowing that he/she has done all that is required of him/her. If this person believes in a deity, he/she usually expresses this faith through the outward and traditional forms of religion, and any belief in the afterlife is purely "academic." Assagioli says that this approach to life suits many people, so they do not look any further.⁷

Hillevi Ruumet understands that Assagioli's "ordinary" person has reached third chakra level consciousness. Success as defined by one's culture has been the goal and it has been achieved through the development of personal power, the

⁶Assagioli, 40.

⁷Ibid., 41.

mastery of skills, and the ability to influence others.⁸ God is an ego projection, still viewed as either a parent (carryover from chakra two) or as a deity who represents one's egoic ambitions. This stage is marked by the "apotheosis of the ego," says Ruumet. She observes that wars are fought in which both sides truly believe that God wants them to triumph, because their values are the "right" ones. Self-righteousness and preoccupation with image are characteristic of religious people at this stage who do not incorporate the tenets of their faith into daily living.⁹

Third chakra living does not satisfy everyone. Ruumet observes that some feel disillusioned because their successes did not bring them the happiness they had hoped for. This realization often dawns on one during mid-life, and can send one into crisis. A growing inner emptiness motivates the person to look for more.¹⁰ Assagioli observes that a change takes place in the inner life of the person which causes him/her to question life beyond its superficial appearances. This could occur after a serious loss of some kind, like the death of a close friend or relative (Grofs' "triggers"). Sometimes the change does not have an obvious cause; at the height of success, one may

⁸Hillevi Ruumet, "Pathways of the Soul: A Helical Model of Psychospiritual Development," Presence: The Journal of Spiritual Directors International 3 (1997): 13.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid., 14.

start feeling that life is lacking something which he/she cannot identify. Assagioli says that "a sense of the unreality and emptiness of ordinary life" gradually sets in.¹¹ The person starts wondering about existential concerns such as the meaning and the purpose of life and the needless suffering found in the world.¹²

In this state of mind, one may try to alleviate the discomfort in different ways, such as staying busy or changing jobs, but ultimately, these attempts to forget are futile.¹³ Assagioli says that this "disturbed condition" remains in the person's depths and eventually reveals itself again with more intensity. The person then finds him/herself faced with a dilemma, because the pain caused by the uneasiness and feelings of inner emptiness keeps getting worse, and no relief is in sight.

The individual feels distracted; most of what constituted his life now seems to him to have vanished like a dream, while no new light has yet come. Indeed, he is as yet ignorant of the existence of such a light, or else he cannot believe that it may ever illuminate him.¹⁴

Assagioli explains that this situation can precipitate a moral crisis, because one's conscience usually becomes more sensitive in this condition. Burdened with an increased

¹¹Assagioli, 41.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid., 42.

¹⁴Ibid.

sense of responsibility, he/she may feel much remorse and guilt to the point of becoming suicidal.¹⁵

Assagioli, Nelson, and Ruumet all understand that here one has approached the passage to the transpersonal realms. This painful questioning is a "wake up call" from God, an invitation to partake of the "heart energy of the Divine."¹⁶ The move from egoic power to universal love requires that the ego yield to the higher Self, a transition which is especially difficult for some people.

The conversion of T provides a good example of how getting caught between these III and IV levels may appear. Her experience was marked by much confusion around issues of identity and life's meaning in relation to enduring spiritual values. Although she had been actively seeking a spiritual rebirth for about eight months, she was not able to believe in God's existence so she had nothing to surrender to. The stress she felt in her body during this period of searching began to affect her senses. She had blurred vision and dull hearing; she began to feel disconnected from reality as she knew it. The turmoil during the months before her spiritual awakening fits Nelson's description of regression in the service of transcendence (RIST).¹⁷

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ruumet, 15.

¹⁷Nelson, 247-48.

T's tendency was to turn inward during this time and engage in "defenseless inner exploration," which Nelson identifies as a main characteristic of RIST.¹⁸ This turning inward is also mentioned by the Grofs who observe that a radical shift occurs in the balance between conscious and unconscious processes during the onset of spiritual emergencies.¹⁹ As T looked inward to find meaning, she only felt more pain, which she did not know how to handle. Unfinished business from the lower chakras made staying grounded and living in the moment difficult.

As was shown in Nelson's model, grounding in the lower chakras is an important factor for determining whether one assimilates the higher energies successfully. Impasses such as the ones T had prompt spiritual advisors to recommend the strengthening of the ego before getting deep into spiritual experience. Learning to integrate the contents of one's own psyche gradually through a discipline such as meditation naturally expands the ego into the higher levels of transpersonal growth. On the other hand, having the contents of the unconscious revealed all at once during spiritual awakening is extremely disruptive. RIST is characterized by upheavals in the psyche during which the ego has to recoil in order to preserve itself from intrusions from the Ground

¹⁸Ibid., 249.

¹⁹Grof and Grof, Stormy Search, 33.

and the Shadow.²⁰ This is a spiritual emergency.

The above examples offer only general guidelines for what can happen in the first stage of the process. Assagioli points out that some never reach the critical period, while others reach it very quickly. Different symptoms and features are present within each individual case. In one person, a severe depression may cause the most concern; in another, the grappling with the moral crisis or metaphysical issues may be the main source of discomfort. Assagioli points out that the symptoms described here may appear similar to those seen in neuroses and "borderline schizophrenic states," so it is important for the practitioner to recognize the existential dilemma, to look at the whole personality of the person in crisis, and to explore the root causes of the difficulties.²¹

Nelson agrees with Assagioli that the symptoms seen in these spiritual crises, particularly RIST, may appear similar to those seen in schizophrenia. He offers some guidelines for how to distinguish RIST from malignant psychosis: whereas RIST ASCs usually start abruptly and have an identifiable catalyst (such as beginning a spiritual practice or experiencing a serious loss), the onset of schizophrenia is insidious and the disorganized thinking is not usually related to specific events; if hallucinations

²⁰Nelson, 248.

²¹Assagioli, 43.

occur during RIST, they are of the higher order; in RIST, affect is preserved, but sometimes exaggerated; "unreal" feelings can turn into insights;²² in schizophrenia, affect is usually flat and not congruent with thought content; a person can be afraid during RIST, but does not see a conspiracy; a person in RIST has some insights about his/her dilemma and is not impulsive; images which arise during RIST are "more cataclysmic and less conspiratorial;" RIST tells a story that has meaning, usually containing themes of death and rebirth.²³

In the next phase, Assagioli talks about the crises which are caused by the spiritual awakening. The actual moment of awakening, or the becoming aware of an "inner reality previously ignored," occurs when the channel opens between the Self and the ego.²⁴ This opening between the superconscious and conscious levels of the psyche is accompanied by a "flood of light, joy, and energy." The person often feels an immediate release from the pain and conflicts experienced during the initial crisis; this supports the idea that the psychological and physical turmoil did not have an organic basis, but was rather a symptom of the inner struggle. In cases such as these, the

²²Nelson, 248.

²³Ibid., 249.

²⁴Assagioli, 40.

awakening itself effects a healing.²⁵

Assagioli observes that, in many cases, the person may have a difficult time incorporating the influx of strength and light. This can occur, for example, if the intellect, the imagination, or the emotions are unbalanced in some way, if the nervous system is overly sensitive, or when the inflow of spiritual energy is extremely sudden and intense.²⁶ When the person actually experiences the reality of the Self, or the spiritual center, he/she may not be able to handle the new state of illumination which results; the person may misinterpret the sensation of internal expansion and the new feelings of participating in the divine nature. A "confusion of levels" may follow, during which the person cannot distinguish the higher "I," that is, the Self, from the little "I," or ego. A blurring may also occur in the boundaries between absolute and relative truths.²⁷

The insights concerning the confusion of levels are pivotal for understanding the relationship between some types of religious experiences and the manifestations found in some forms of mental illness. For instance, if the ego becomes inflated by the spiritual energies, or if the Self overwhelms and assimilates the ego, the person may actually

²⁵Ibid., 43.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid., 44.

believe that he/she is God or some important religious figure. This phenomenon is not uncommon in the "paranoid delusions" found in schizophrenia.²⁸ Assagioli asserts that the labeling and dismissal of the delusions as such certainly does not help in understanding their nature or cause. In order to assist the "patient," a more thorough explanation is required that takes into account the actual dynamics of the disturbance.²⁹

Assagioli explains that when the channels open between the conscious and superconscious levels, the recipient experiences "a sense of greatness and internal expansion," and feels that he/she is sharing in the divine nature.³⁰ This state of consciousness is the direct result of the Self's freshly revealed intimate connection with and envelopment of the self. Assagioli attributes the episodes of identity disorder as seen in the paranoid delusions to the inappropriate response of the ego to the higher Self. The "fatal error," of course, is to assign the powers and attributes of the Self to the ego.³¹

Assagioli insightfully points out that religious traditions of all ages contain numerous examples of variations on this theme. For instance, Augustine proclaims:

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid., 45.

"When the soul loves something, it becomes like unto it; if it should love terrestrial things it becomes terrestrial, but if it should love God [may we ask] does it not become God?"³² Muktananda provides us with other examples: When Sufi saint Mansur Mastana reached the samadhi state (Self realization which occurs when the crown chakra is opened), he said, "I am God."³³ Likewise, the great Indian sage Shankaracharya proclaimed during his samadhi experience, "I am Shiva."³⁴

This description fits the Hindu account of the opening of the seventh chakra as discussed in Chapter 3. In Hindu thought, the raising of kundalini is not just the means for reaching communion with the divinity; it is understood as the key to divinization itself. In this religious context, claiming Godhood is both appropriate and desirable. One may ask then: What is the difference between the proclamation of the mental patient and that of the spiritual adept? The answer to this question has to do with the perspective that each proclaimer holds when he/she utters the words. The yogi has spent years practicing a spiritual discipline which culminated in this response. The mental patient who has fallen victim to paranoid delusions is not only confused about how he got there; he also has no consensual reality-

³²Augustine, as quoted by Assagioli, 44.

³³Muktananda, 46.

³⁴Ibid.

based bearing on where he is.³⁵

This does not necessarily mean, however, that the mechanism is not the same in both the yogi and the mental patient. In his book The Exploration of The Inner World, Anton Boisen addresses this very issue when he identifies the same "messianic consciousness" in certain psychotic patients and some people of religious genius. The ideas which characterize this consciousness are: that one is engaged in a life or death struggle; that the realization of the Kingdom of God is imminent; and that one has an "exalted" role in ushering in this new world. These ideas were found in hospital patients who underwent acute disturbances marked by religious concerns; they were also found in George Fox, Paul of Tarsus, the Hebrew prophets, and Jesus.³⁶

Boisen maintains that all of the people mentioned above passed through deep problem-solving experiences in which they attempted to reorganize their personalities around the higher ideals represented by religion. He believes that the messianic ideas they held emerged from their intense

³⁵ From a larger perspective, one can see the influences of cultural prohibitions which inhibit spiritual growth. How would this situation be different if these experiences were validated rather than labeled as pathological? Assuming that some people in this condition have had a real spiritual opening, if they had had a definite spiritual path to follow to reach the goals of Self-actualization, would the outcome have been the same?

³⁶Boisen, 134.

struggle through a deep inner turmoil, one that could have ultimately destroyed their sanity and sense of purpose and identity. These people turned inward to face "the great realities of death and life, of personal destiny in success and failure, and... the social whole to which [they gave] allegiance."³⁷ They all emerged victorious as the captain of their own souls.

Assagioli's insights complement Boisen's observations and offer a possible explanation for the actual mechanism at work in these disruptive problem-solving experiences. In theory, the messianic consciousness could be attributed to the identity change which occurs when ego meets Self. The ego becomes very confused and inflated by these higher energies and has to go through a process of integration to regain a new perspective.³⁸

In Philip's case study, issues surrounding his identity in relationship to God were a concern for him as he moved away from the familiar I-thou relationship to what he describes as a nondualistic relationship with God. He was

³⁷Ibid., 139.

³⁸ Boisen points out that some make it through and we call their experiences religious conversion. The others who do not make it are identified as mentally ill. A question is raised here: "How many people fall through the cracks because they cannot make it through this crisis on their own and are not getting the appropriate help?" Bentov believed that as many as 30% of hospitalized schizophrenics may have had kundalini awakenings which went awry or were misdiagnosed because of the lack of a diagnostic category for these spiritual emergencies. See Greenwell, 42.

clear that he was not God, but he knew also that he was in God and that God was in him. He describes his connection to God as that of Vine and branch, but he could not tell where the life of the branch and Vine were separated.³⁹

Philip's case also presented some insights about the confusion of levels. He talked about the radical differences in perception between the sixth and seventh chakra levels. In the sixth chakra, he was able to stay in the moment; here, he was in tune with relative truths. At the seventh level, he was aware that everything was one, arising out of nothingness moment by moment; he understood this state as awareness of the mysterious workings of God. At this level of consciousness, Philip found it difficult to function.

When ego meets Self, the ego may not be strong enough to withstand the influx of higher spiritual energies and may actually collapse into the Self. Greenwell describes the situation: "one has merged into infinite chaos with no place to come home to."⁴⁰ When T was first spirit-filled and in the immediate months which followed, she felt completely overshadowed by higher power. She compared it then to being in love, and a part of her did not want to go back to her former reality with its responsibilities. Focusing on mundane tasks was extremely difficult because her heart and mind were fixed on spiritual realities.

³⁹St. Romain, 30.

⁴⁰Greenwell, 286.

Greenwell says that in dealing with the imbalances between Higher Self and ego, bridges have to be built between these two different planes of reality. The desired result, of course, is to integrate the values of the Self into the ego's patterns of living.⁴¹ T's identity having collapsed into the Self, she had to gradually rebuild a weak ego on the new foundational knowledge of the Self. In cases in which the ego becomes inflated by the Self, Assagioli advises that one sympathize, and while acknowledging that the belief is ultimately true, gently try to show the person the nature of the misconception. The goal is to help him/her learn to make the appropriate distinctions.⁴²

Some other manifestations caused by the sudden release of spiritual energies are identified by Assagioli: a loss of control and disordered behavior (e.g., crying, shouting, and singing); playing the role of savior or prophet (e.g., one may start a sect); automatic writing; and auditory and visual hallucinations. The content of any perceived message from the divine, Assagioli advises, should be examined with "sound judgment," regardless of its perceived origins. One should beware of any messages which "command blind obedience" or inflate the personality.⁴³

The next phase of the spiritual journey, identified by

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Assagioli, 45.

⁴³Ibid., 46.

Assagioli as "reactions to the awakening," is characterized by a reassertion of the ego.⁴⁴ Whereas the individual was overtaken by the beauty of the Higher Self during the initial stages of the awakening, he/she is now confronted again by the woundedness of the ego. The sense of peace, happiness, and assurance which predominated in the first phase gives way to doubt, guilt, and a sense of unworthiness.⁴⁵

Assagioli explains that this reaction occurs because the self was only temporarily transformed during the awakening. He offers a helpful analogy for understanding the process. During the initial stages of the awakening when ego meets Self, the elated neophyte feels as if he/she has been miraculously transported to the bright summit and allowed to experience the splendor of the view below.⁴⁶ This glorious vision eventually fades and the aspirant again finds him/herself at the foot of the mountain with the painful realization that it now has to be ascended step by step. Assagioli reassures the discouraged person that the "fall" after a spiritual awakening is a natural occurrence; this knowledge can alleviate the guilt and fear one may be carrying if convinced that he/she has caused the downward

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid., 46-47.

⁴⁶Ibid., 49.

plunge.⁴⁷

Assagioli remarks that the deep depression which one may pass through during this period should not be regarded as a "mere pathological condition," because it has definite psychological origins.⁴⁸ This type of despair is indicative of the difficulty one encounters when exposed to the bright light of spiritual awareness after having lived in the constrictive darkness of the ego for so long. The writings of the Christian mystics speak of this reality. John of the Cross, for example, referred to his painful realization of the great contrast between God's light and his "unclean" soul as the "dark night."⁴⁹

In psychological terms, Assagioli is saying that a chasm now exists between the new way of being which is mediated by the Self (revealed to the neophyte during the "mountain top" revelation) and the previous way mediated by the ego. Assagioli's observation that the newly awakened aspirant is now required to climb the mountain one step at a time speaks of the process of integration which must take place between these two different realities.⁵⁰ Now, bridges have to be built between the higher Self's values

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid., 47.

⁴⁹Ibid., 48.

⁵⁰Ibid., 49. In Assagioli's stage model, when the aspirant begins this part of the journey, he/she has passed into the "phases of the Process of Transmutation."

and the ego's patterns of living, as discussed by Greenwell above.

The process of integration can be understood theoretically and experientially in terms of chakra levels. The therapist can gather and sort information according to the insights of the chakra model to get a comprehensive picture of the issues which need to be addressed. Determining the levels at which the person functioned before and during the spiritual awakening is a good place to start. An illustration using the case study materials follows.

At the beginning of T's conversion, she was in a transition from the second to third chakra. She was faced with the developmental task common to adolescence of establishing a sense of identity in the world. This period was stressful for her because the inadequate resolution of issues from the first two chakras created a shaky foundation on which to build a solid and healthy identity. In other words, unfinished business around issues of basic trust, self-esteem, autonomy, and functioning healthily in relationships was also present.

During the moment of revelation when she felt a oneness with God, saw lights, and lost a grip on time and space, she was clearly in the seventh chakra, according to the theories. Experientially, she was now faced with the task of bringing many different levels of consciousness into harmony. Feeling flooded by repressed feelings and memories

of abuse from her childhood as well as strong feelings of divine love, she was very confused. These conflicting levels of information set the stage for ambivalence on her part. For instance, although she felt joy in God's presence, a part of her did not trust God and was angry with God for abandoning her when she was a child. If God was present in her life, all powerful, and really loved her, why didn't God intervene while she was being abused as a child? God's silence on this matter reinforced the belief she already had that she was not worth protecting. In therapy, cognitive distortions such as these need to be addressed.

The positive side to having a spiritual awakening in spite of the unresolved issues from lower levels is that it introduces new avenues for healing. For instance, the love of God can be carried back into the pain of the early years through visualization. This was evident in the story of Sister Helen, who imagined that she returned to her mother's womb. She was able to bring the compassion from the renewed opening of the heart chakra into the unfinished business she had in her relationship with her mother.

Recalling Nelson's theory, the distance between chakra levels before and during the awakening is a good indicator of whether one will be plunged into spiritual emergency. In T's case, the move from second to seventh chakra consciousness was too much to handle; she had to work on all of the chakra levels in between as well as the unfinished

issues from the first two levels. Mineda's disruptive experience was similar to T's probably because she also had a shaky foundation at the first three levels going into her experience. She appeared to make an adequate transition from the third to fourth levels when she described that her life was characterized by love and service to others for several years. She went into spiritual emergency at the sixth level, which was indicated by the out of body experiences and the flashes of insight and telepathy. In both Mineda's and T's situations, upper chakras opened abruptly and out of sequence, causing spiritual emergencies.

On the other hand, the cases of Sister Helen and Philip are marked by a more gradual spiritual and psychological development. Both of them had already reached and sustained openings at the higher chakras. For instance, Sister Helen was well-established in ministry (V) and seeing auras (VI) before she experienced the renewal and healing at the heart center (IV). Philip was active in ministry and speaking in tongues (V) before the progression began into the upper two chakras. In both of their spiritual journeys, it appears that a suitable foundation was already in place waiting to be augmented.

In the journeys of Philip and Sister Helen, movement from one chakra level to another was not out of sequence as usually is the case in spiritual emergencies. However, because Philip's case had dangerous and dramatic aspects due

to the extreme physical symptoms and understandable fear of the unknown, his experience was a spiritual emergency. In the case of Sister Helen, a sense of fluidity, trust and acceptance in the process was operating in her spiritual journey. Out of the four case studies presented, hers is the only one which can be classified as spiritual emergence.

Two factors which may have contributed significantly to the gradual chakra openings of Philip and Sister Helen were the amount of life experience and the quality of the relationship with God that each had at the time of their awakenings. For example, Sister Helen was in her early forties at the time of her story and had nurtured a relationship with God from the time she was a child. Philip was in his late thirties during his awakening and had been active for fourteen years in the charismatic movement. Both had the sufficient permeability between ego and ground energies discussed by Nelson to aid them in assimilating new levels of spiritual energy and awareness.

Another significant factor which facilitated a gradual opening of the chakras in the cases of Sister Helen and Philip was good ego strength. This strength was probably directly related to their amounts of life experience and successful completion of many developmental tasks up to this point in their lives. If you recall, Nelson said that the fortified self was necessary in keeping one from being overwhelmed by ground energies. Philip and Sister Helen each

had a strong sense of identity as they progressed into deeper levels of spiritual awareness. Although Philip experienced an ego death during his kundalini awakening, his capacity to stay in the moment and describe what was happening to him remained intact. Sister Helen was also able to stay focused and articulate the details of her journey with awareness. Both were able to contain and integrate the spiritual energies.

Mineda and T were not able to assimilate the spiritual energies in the same way. This difficulty may have been present because they did not possess adequate amounts of ego strength. Their egos collapsed under the pressure of spiritual growth. Both were at the adolescent stage; Mineda was in her early twenties and T was eighteen. At this stage of development, the ego is generally more vulnerable and less stable because it is going through a time of transition from childhood to adulthood (II-III). Added to this was a weakness caused by childhood trauma, a possible predisposition to bipolar disorder, and no previous satisfying trusting relationship with God. The introduction of spiritual energy into an unprepared vessel such as this is bound to challenge the coping abilities of the ego.

When the ego regresses back into the lower chakras, one loses ground until a stabilization takes place. Mineda regressed back to the second chakra and found it necessary to quit her job. Although she does not provide us with

details, her mental health steadily declined over a period of ten years to the point where her family had to provide for her basic care. A possibility is that she regressed to the first chakra. When she received the support needed (and probably medication) to stabilize, the process of integration resumed at a higher level.

In viewing Mineda's situation, one may initially think that her ego had regressed to a point which would prohibit any integration of spiritual realities from taking place. This, however, does not appear to be the case. Even though ground energies poured in and overwhelmed Mineda's unprepared ego to where she could not function, the possibility still exists that something positive was occurring when she was in the disorganized state. The fact that Mineda prayed throughout her ordeal and believed that God was bringing about changes for her good attests to this. Looking at Mineda's journey from a larger perspective, she emerged from her prolonged state of disorientation as a woman of stronger faith and referred to herself as a "friend of God;" she also acquired wisdom and knowledge that she had earnestly sought from God. She has been able to share insights about her story that have been a gift to others who struggle in their spiritual journeys. This is a positive outcome indeed.

T's situation was similar to Mineda's in that she also lost ground. The impact of the awakening caused physical and

mental confusion to the point where she could barely focus on everyday tasks. She managed to cope well enough to take care of her basic needs, maintain a social life, and learn skills to support herself financially. She was able to gradually rebuild the ego on the basis of the new knowledge acquired during the awakening, but many issues went unresolved for years. The awakening itself had felt like a trauma; her reaction to it met the criteria for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder.⁵¹ The integration of higher spiritual realities was impaired, because much of her energy was expended in coping.

As one observes the strength and the function of the ego in each of the case studies, it becomes apparent that integration of spiritual realities with ego patterns occurred across the board with different manifestations. In other words, integration took place within each aspirant at the level in which it was needed. Mineda and T had more issues at the lower chakras, so this is where their energies were concentrated. Philip and Sister Helen were fairly stabilized at the higher chakras coming in to their experiences, so much of their process of integration involved the upper levels.

⁵¹ PTSD is characterized by intense fear and a sense of helplessness during the event; a reexperiencing of the event through dreams and flashbacks; avoidance of things associated with the event and feelings of dissociation when getting too close to the topic; and irritability and difficulty with concentration. See DSM IV, 424-29.

This observation is consistent with the physiological theories on kundalini awakenings which say that the energy first rises to the crown, then drops back down and begins working on areas which are blocked.⁵² Psychologically, this observation is valid because the tasks of the higher chakras require adequate resolution of the lower. For instance, the call to ministry (V) as a pastor will best be fulfilled by one who has a trust in the basic goodness of life (I), good relationships and social skills (II), a sense of personal competence and ambition (III), and a loving stance toward self and others with the awareness that all partake of the divine essence (IV).

In concluding this section, some general comments are made about the process of integration as it relates to chakra levels. Experience shows that one can reach high levels of spiritual awareness without cleaning up unfinished business from earlier stages of development. For instance, a person who has had a genuine spiritual awakening during which the love of God was made real to him/her may express the love inappropriately if he/she has not learned how to honor boundaries in relationships. A pastor once shared about a person in his church who had incredible insight and compassion that he knew was "of the Lord." However, when this gifted woman shared her knowledge with others, her manner was so intrusive that her message was not heard.

⁵²Sannella, 30-31.

Assagioli and Ruumet have made similar observations. Assagioli comments that these progressive and regressive trends can be found in most people on the road to Self-actualization.⁵³ Ruumet advises the aspirant to keep vertical and horizontal levels of growth balanced so that with each movement toward the Divinity, one also brings with him/her the highest level of development of which he/she is capable.⁵⁴

Approaches to Early Stages of Intervention

In traditional psychiatry, the usual procedure for dealing with psychotic episodes is to hospitalize and medicate the patient until the symptoms subside. John Nelson does not agree with this approach. He points out that no evidence exists which shows that this practice leads to better long range outcomes. He maintains that, to the contrary, treating all psychotic ASCs as medical emergencies precludes recognizing the nuances found in each one and communicates to the patient that his/her experience has no value, no matter how healing it might be.⁵⁵

Nelson instead recommends treating all psychotic ASCs as spiritual emergencies until the practitioner has enough information to know that the patient is on a path of malignant regression. He notes three exceptions when this

⁵³Assagioli, 57.

⁵⁴Ruumet, 23.

⁵⁵Nelson, 399.

approach is not appropriate: when the patient is an obvious danger to him/herself or others; when the patient has paranoid delusions which can lead to suicide or violent behaviors; and, when a patient who has been psychotic before asks for medication to alleviate the symptoms.⁵⁶

Nelson's initial strategies for intervention include taking the patient away from the stressful conditions which preceded the episode and placing him/her in a peaceful setting where trained people are available to listen to his/her emerging thoughts and feelings and empathically respond. A softly lit room, comforting voice, and encouragement of gently flowing with the experience may be enough to alleviate the arousal and return the person to a "consensual state of consciousness." Nelson has also found that the "long-abandoned" practice of swaddling a patient in cool wet sheets is very soothing and can help effect the return to consensual reality. Psychotherapy can then be geared toward exposing the dynamics which triggered the psychotic regression.⁵⁷

Nelson maintains that the goal of treating acute psychotic conditions is to restore the patient to a state in which spiritual growth can progress. He remarks that for some people, this involves a strengthening of the ego, while for others it means learning to surrender the ego to the

⁵⁶Ibid., 399-400.

⁵⁷Ibid., 400-01.

Ground. For schizophrenic and manic ASCs, intervention involves the "artful use" of medication, then teaching the client skills appropriate to his/her level of growth.⁵⁸

In employing the above strategies for intervention, Nelson has found that one fourth of the patients in their first episode of psychosis will return to ordinary consciousness within days without the administering of neuroleptics. Another quarter of the remaining patients will also recover more gradually without the use of drugs. In general, Nelson estimates that a little more than half of any sample population of acute psychotic patients will require chemical intervention to arrest the regression.⁵⁹

In the following section, a brief overview of some of the basic issues which may arise while counseling persons in spiritual emergency will be presented along with a discussion of strategies for intervention. The works of John Nelson, Bonnie Greenwell, and Emma Bragdon, all of whom have extensive training in this area, will be utilized as the main sources. Their holistic models for therapy focus on effecting healing in the following five areas: physical, emotional, intellectual, social, and spiritual. Each of these dimensions is presented separately.

Interventions for Physical Wholeness

John Nelson recognizes that spiritual emergency is

⁵⁸Ibid., 402.

⁵⁹Ibid., 401.

stressful to a person's whole system. The health of the body is closely related to the workings of psyche and spirit and its needs are taken seriously in Nelson's approach to therapy. He recommends that the client get a physical exam to rule out any neurological conditions. He also advises that one follow the rules of nutrition and practice aerobic exercise everyday.⁶⁰ An important goal of therapy with one in spiritual emergency is to strengthen the body so that it can contain and channel spiritual energies effectively.

When high levels of prana begin to flow through the body, muscular tension is often released. Bragdon comments that spasms and body wriggles are common in some people during meditation. The locations of tension in the body are often indicators of what psychological issues are being dealt with by the physiological processes. For instance, greed and lust may cause a tightening of the muscles around the heart; fear is usually carried in the neck, shoulders, and back areas.⁶¹

Greenwell believes that the episodes of shaking, twisting, clenching the jaw, emitting animal sounds, etc., which are called kriyas, can occur when different areas of the brain are influenced by intense amounts of energy. She also observes that kriyas occur during altered states when

⁶⁰Ibid., 408-09.

⁶¹Emma Bragdon, The Call of Spiritual Emergency: From Personal Crisis to Personal Transformation (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 86.

one moves from awareness of the physical body to the spiritual body. Greenwell postulates that during these experiences, the awareness that keeps the physical body in its usual fixed posture is temporarily absent. She compares what happens in this surrendering to pranic energy as similar to being carried like a piece of bark on a river.⁶²

In Philip's case study of kundalini awakening, the presence of physical symptoms and activity was especially pronounced. He identified at least fifteen postures, or spontaneous asanas (such as squeezing his eyes together, furrowing his brow, pulling his ears back, and raising his arms) which eased the physical discomforts he faced daily. According to the yogic tradition, asanas are postures which strengthen the physical body so that it can contain the spiritual energies.⁶³ Clients in spiritual emergency can be greatly helped by this information. Philip's story provides a good example of the fear and panic which can arise when one does not know that these physical manifestations may be a natural part of his/her transformational process. Education on this matter and assurance that one is okay are important, especially in the early stages of intervention.

Body therapies, exercise, massages, and breathing

⁶²Greenwell, 237.

⁶³Ibid., 331.

exercises can help one in alleviating stress and strengthening the body. Deep tissue massage may help one release repressed memories and traumas held in the body. Nelson says that he sometimes uses touch during therapy in the form of a friendly hug or a hand on the shoulder, to help the person feel grounded and as a gesture of reassurance. In situations when a person feels very agitated by the influx of spiritual energies and emotional chaos, he may use mild dosages of medication to help him/her through the crisis.⁶⁴

Feelings of not being grounded are common for the person in spiritual emergency. Greenwell offers suggestions for helping one be more fully present in the body: stomping, dancing, hugging a tree, working in the garden, and visualizing that one is an oak with roots extending deep into the earth, are just some of the many things that one can do.⁶⁵ I have found that taking walks with my dog and tuning in to my feet on the ground or going to the park and feeling close to nature are grounding. Exercise and diet (eating heavier foods, such as meat) can also help in this area.

The attitude which the client has toward his/her body is an important issue to explore in therapy. Greenwell points out that some people have spent years separating body

⁶⁴Nelson, 409.

⁶⁵Greenwell, 234.

from spirit.⁶⁶ This is a concern which has also been raised by Howard Clinebell, who observes that our culture overvalues control and rational processes to the extent that the body is often neglected. In this state of bodily alienation and rejection, one not only diminishes access to the healing potentials of play and creativity, but sets him/herself up for the eventual eruptions of the repressed material. Clinebell asserts that these disowned, "nonrational, body-feelings" can become "demonic," manifesting themselves in acts of aggression, compulsive behaviors, and episodes of depression.⁶⁷ Offering education on these dynamics is one way to help the client.

A goal of therapy is to help the client honor and nurture the body. Eating balanced and nutritious meals and avoiding such things as alcohol, caffeine, red meat, etc., strengthens the body as it goes through physiological changes during transformation by minimizing toxins and maximizing nutrition.⁶⁸ Exercise, reducing practices that stir up too much prana, and proper breathing are some of the other ways in which one can begin to actively work with the spiritual energies as he/she learns to contain and channel them effectively. Bonnie Greenwell has written extensively

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Howard Clinebell, Contemporary Growth Therapies: Resources for Actualizing Human Wholeness (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981), 201.

⁶⁸St. Romain, 132.

in this area and I refer the reader to her work.⁶⁹

Interventions for Emotional Wholeness

The emotional dimension usually requires the most attention during the early stages of spiritual emergency. When spiritual energy is released in the organism, the client often experiences mood swings ranging from deep depression to ecstatic bliss. These emotions appear to originate from several different sources. For instance, Greenwell believes that these intense emotions can be a result of biochemical and hormonal changes which occur in reaction to intense amounts of pranic energy being released in the person's system.⁷⁰ Swami Rama attributes the disorientation and confusion which can accompany kundalini awakening to the massive and sudden release of what is in one's unconscious. This event is especially traumatic for the unprepared, that is, those who did not practice a spiritual discipline to strengthen their bodies and handle unconscious contents before the awakening.⁷¹

Nelson addresses the topic of emotional chaos much along the same lines as Rama and observes that the longer one has pushed the shadow nature down, the more explosive will be its expression. He advises that one retreat to a setting where it is permissible and safe to lose control for

⁶⁹Greenwell, 231-68.

⁷⁰Ibid., 270.

⁷¹Rama, 35.

awhile, so that these toxic, bottled-up emotions can be expressed and released. Those who have difficulty with verbalizing their emotions may be helped through such means as art therapy and journal writing. An important factor in healing is that the therapist accept the client's intense emotions with compassion. One of the main goals of therapy is to have the client view his/her own human weaknesses and feelings of vulnerability with compassion as well.⁷²

Bragdon emphasizes that for spiritual growth to advance, one must be willing to deal with all of the personal issues which may arise, especially those from childhood which impact one's present reality negatively.⁷³ This conviction has been clearly expressed by many as has been seen throughout this dissertation, especially in the idea of taking care of unfinished business from the lower chakras. Greenwell provides us with a good example for why this clean-up is necessary in her observation that the people who respond most fearfully to the energies of spiritual awakening are those who have a history of repressed physical and sexual trauma. She points out that because states of transcendence are so similar to dissociation, the whole complex associated with the initial trauma is often reactivated.⁷⁴

⁷²Nelson, 410.

⁷³Bragdon, 3.

⁷⁴Greenwell, 272.

In situations such as these, Greenwell advises that one keep working through the issues in individual therapy. Seeking a support group, sharing with people who can be trusted, understanding and accepting the process are ways to deal with the fearful aspects of spiritual emergency. Active methods for exploring and confronting fear can be engaged by such means as talking to it, letting it tell its story, and drawing. Greenwell believes that each person has a wise self and a fearful self living within. Although the validity of each self needs to be honored, one can choose who will be in control.⁷⁵

Another strategy which can be used when one is confronted with strong emotions is taking the stance of witnessing them. Greenwell borrows this idea from two yoga masters, Aurobindo and Free John. Their premise is that each person houses a Witness who does not suffer and who is not affected by changing emotions. One needs to feel this Witness who is not touched, and try not to become discouraged while in the process of learning this. They maintain that the contraction against one's strong feelings is what actually causes the pain. The aspirant is urged to stay in the moment with the targeted emotion without fear until the pain turns into free, neutral energy.⁷⁶

An important goal to strive for in therapy is to let

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Ibid., 273.

love direct the whole process. This is a difficult feat for many, especially for those who have been abused as children. A helpful principle to keep in mind is that thoughts and feelings associated with such issues as self-hatred and low self-esteem are learned and can be unlearned. In her book There is Nothing Wrong with You, Buddhist teacher Cheri Huber describes how one can move beyond these destructive patterns toward self-compassion and self-acceptance.⁷⁷ Twelve Step programs can also be very helpful.

Interventions for Intellectual Wholeness

Nelson observes that when a person is exposed to openings from the Ground and begins experiencing unfamiliar altered states, he/she can easily become terrified. Not having a cognitive framework for understanding what is happening, one may believe that he/she has gone insane. Intervention focuses on giving the client intellectual information about the process, such as describing the nature and healing functions of regression in the service of transcendence. The therapist can also offer the client reading materials which are relevant to his journey.⁷⁸

When handling hallucinatory or delusional material, Nelson employs empathy and active listening skills. He urges therapists to imagine what life would be like if he/she were

⁷⁷Cheri Huber, There is Nothing Wrong with You: Going Beyond Self-Hate (Mountain View, Calif: Keep It Simple Books, 1993).

⁷⁸Nelson, 412-13.

experiencing the same phenomena, then, from this new position of understanding, reflect this back to the client's situation in a personal context. The departures from reality need to be validated as indications that personal transformation is taking place, not as consensual reality. After this difference is clear, the therapist can help the client to sort through his/her visions and facilitate the process in a way that honors the client's own innate wisdom and ability to learn and grow through self-discovery.⁷⁹

Depending on the client's religious background, some cognitive restructuring may be necessary. God images are formed in one's psyche at very young ages and often reflect object relations with one's parents and the symbols used in the family religion. For one to project these images onto the new experience of spirituality would not be surprising. For instance, I am still in the process of letting go of my previous god image of the punitive celestial ogre which I learned as a young Catholic raised in a dysfunctional family; this negative god image was reinforced somewhat during my five years in the Pentecostal church. My new God image continues to be reformed as I embrace the more loving aspects of the Divinity (which, by the way, are found in the same Bible) and address issues left over from the lower

⁷⁹Ibid.

chakras.⁸⁰

Cognitive restructuring may also entail changing one's views to adopt a religious perspective which is more healthy and life affirming. Howard Clinebell offers guidelines to help one discern between salugenic and pathogenic approaches to religion.⁸¹ His insights can be used as a gauge for one who is trying to move away from the destructive aspects of religion which he/she may have learned in earlier years. For instance, while I was questioning and deciding to change my fundamentalist perspective, I was able to see from Howard's guidelines that the "rigid," "authoritarian" views I had held as a Pentecostal were helping to perpetuate a sense of low self-esteem. They also discouraged an appreciation of the insights offered by other faith perspectives; writing this dissertation would not have been an option for me theologically fifteen years ago.

The story of Sister Helen contains examples of changes in thinking about the parameters of appropriate religious behavior and the revelation of spiritual truths. The fact that she allowed herself to dance with her classmates after

⁸⁰When one does not commit to serious, responsible Bible study as found in the historical/critical approach (exegesis), he/she may resort to reading one's own meaning into the text. The Bible then becomes like a Rorschach inkblot. The therapist can use the information present in the client's narrow subjective interpretations of Scripture to pinpoint painful personal issues. The Scriptures which promote healing and self care can be used to effect cognitive restructuring.

⁸¹ Clinebell, Growth Counseling, 106-08.

she had been in the convent for many years shows change in what she now considered morally acceptable. In her reclaiming of dancing and the joy it brought her, her religious stance became more healthy. Other cognitive changes began to take place when she began to study and adopt views from traditionally eastern religions. Philip and Mineda experienced similar shifts in their cognitive worldviews when they realized that the descriptions of kundalini awakening applied to their situations.

Interventions for Social Wholeness

When a person undergoes a spiritual emergency, he/she can feel very scared and alone. Friends and family usually do not understand what is happening enough to be able to support the person through the crisis. Sometimes the person is diagnosed as mentally ill and hospitalized. Those who keep going in spite of their difficulties are usually so absorbed in the inner processes that they have a difficult time functioning in their everyday lives. This situation invites judgment by unenlightened associates who may make sarcastic comments about the person's new spiritual ideals rendering him/her ineffective.⁸²

When the person in spiritual emergency feels supported, much unnecessary suffering is alleviated and the process of healing and integration can progress more smoothly. The

⁸²Assagioli regards this as a trial to teach one self-reliance and the overcoming of personal sensitivity without resentment (50).

Spiritual Emergence Network in Santa Cruz, California is available to offer assistance through referrals of therapists who are located in the person's area. SEN can also provide information for retreat centers which have staff who are trained in handling these special situations.

If the person in spiritual emergency is cared for at home, the ideal environment is one which is clean and quiet. Soft colors and low lighting are desirable; natural sounds such as singing birds and flowing water can promote grounding. The person in spiritual emergency needs to feel physically and emotionally safe. Caring for him/her will require patience. Those who understand the process will be the most comforting and reassuring to the person, so an important step is to get him/her in touch with a support system. Support is also helpful for the caretakers, because attending to one in crisis can be stressful. Emma Bragdon has observed that spiritual emergencies last for varying amounts of time. When the body gets tired of the physical intensity and emotional catharsis, the crisis will end and the person will be able to go back to the routines of daily living. Integrating the changes brought about by the transformation can take many months.⁸³

The new ways of perceiving reality gained through the crisis may influence one to reevaluate the priorities in his/her life. This reorientation may mean a career change,

⁸³Bragdon, 212-14.

going back to school, deciding to have a baby, or becoming more involved with the church. Changes in relationships may occur as the person strives to become more honest and loving. Relational problems that had been previously ignored may now be a focus of attention. In committed love relationships and close friendships, the abilities to be flexible and to communicate well will help those involved move through the transition. Unfortunately, one may find that he/she has to sever ties with those who do not understand or accept the changes which have transpired.⁸⁴

Interventions for Spiritual Wholeness

Howard Clinebell names seven interrelated spiritual needs which make up the spiritual dimension of our lives. These needs are: to have a loving relationship with the Divinity, to embrace and develop the higher self, to feel at home in the universe, to live with values and a philosophy which provide meaning for our lives, to have avenues for transcendence, and to have support from a caring and nurturing faith community.⁸⁵

Clinebell's insights can serve as general guidelines for pinpointing areas of concern and growth in the person in spiritual emergency. In viewing the case studies presented, one can see that each person had different issues at the time of spiritual rebirth. Sister Helen's spiritual

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵Clinebell, Growth Counseling, 106.

emergence involved a deepening of her relationship with the Divinity and herself as she pulled inward to hear God's voice and seek God's will and direction. She was also focused on embracing and developing the higher self more through meditation, prayer, and learning to work with pranic energies. Sister Helen's philosophical world view was revised and broadened as she embraced new ideas and practices from other spiritual traditions, such as yoga, Native American spirituality, and Buddhism. Her seeking led her to explore avenues for transcendence from these other traditions; she was able to incorporate this new knowledge and move into more fulfilling, effective forms of ministry. Although Sister Helen experienced "dark nights" during her journey, she was able to stay grounded and trust the process. Her story exemplifies the natural unfolding of spiritual growth and clearly demonstrates how the spiritual "needs" talked about by Clinebell are interrelated.

In a transformational crisis situation, the spiritual "needs" can feel like nightmares for awhile. One might say that the person in crisis has over embraced the higher self or is experiencing too much transcendence. Ram Das says that the unprepared person is like a toaster who has been plugged into 220 volts instead of 110 -- everything sizzles.⁸⁶ One may feel confused about who he/she is in relationship to the Divinity, the community, and the

⁸⁶Ram Das, quoted in Grof and Grof, Stormy Search, 69.

universe. The previously held values and philosophical worldview has been radically altered, and one faces the task of reorientation.

In this state, one feels overwhelmed and has difficulty staying grounded. The Grofs advise that a person stop engaging in all forms of spiritual practice and active inner exploration for awhile. Engaging in simple tasks, such as gardening and cleaning, and physical exercise will help tone down the levels of energy in the person's system and help him/her begin containing the experience. When one is ready, he/she can actively engage the process again by working with dreams, expressing deep emotions through art, and practicing meditation.⁸⁷

Choosing a spiritual path which promotes a healthy, realistic outlook on life is important in the process of integrating the higher values into the patterns of the ego. Clinebell's insights on salugenic and pathogenic approaches to religion can be used as guidelines.⁸⁸ Twelve step meetings can also be helpful with the process of integration, because they focus on facing all of life's issues with the wisdom and strength of Higher Power. Through sharing with others and listening to others' experiences, one can actively address the cognitive and emotional changes which occur during spiritual transformation. Attending these

⁸⁷Grof and Grof, Stormy Search, 161-67.

⁸⁸Clinebell, Growth Counseling, 106-08.

meetings can also help the person to establish a support network and keep him/her from falling into the trap of isolation.

CHAPTER 6

Concluding Remarks

At the beginning of this dissertation, I stated that my intentions were to complement the mechanistic psychoanalytic theories of Christian mystical conversion with the insights from the kundalini/chakra literature. This has been possible only to an extent because some fundamental differences exist between the two models which cannot be reconciled.

The kundalini/chakra model presupposes the spiritual nature of human beings; the psychoanalytic theories discussed in Chapter 1 make no mention of the human drive toward spiritual growth. Whereas the psychoanalytic theories understand disruptive mystical conversion experiences as the result of conflicting unconscious contents seeking resolution, the kundalini/chakra model views the intrapsychic disruptions as the side effects of powerful spiritual forces at work within the individual. Interpretations from the psychoanalytic school explain the convert's visionary experiences, perceptions of lights, voices, and moments of transcendence as evidence of one's losing touch with reality; proponents of the kundalini/chakra model would agree that one has lost touch with consensual reality, but at the same time say that one is becoming in touch with a much larger reality, one that ultimately promises fulfillment.

What the psychoanalytic models offer is a way to

understand the working of the individual unconscious mind. These insights are helpful for guiding one through the process of healing when the issues faced involve arrests in development which affect the individual's basic functioning in the consensual world. In reference to the chakra model, psychoanalytic theories help one to reach levels of functioning characteristic of the third chakra. When one seeks to move into the transpersonal levels, a new model for conceptualization is needed. The chakra model allows for and can explain one's movement into the encounter with the sacred. It recognizes this transition as a reality in its own right, one which is both natural and desirable.

In this dissertation, four case studies were presented of Christians in various stages of transformation. All of these cases had elements which could be classified under a DSM IV diagnosis. The diagnostic categories available, however, could not address the spiritual components operating in each case. On a broad scale, this omission reflects the division which exists in our culture between science and spirituality. On a smaller scale, this omission can have serious consequences for some patients. This was apparent in the case study of Mineda, who avoided seeking psychiatric help because she knew that the spiritual aspects of her situation would not be taken seriously.

Mineda's and T's case studies describe psychological upheavals which began during a time of deep searching and

involvement in spiritual practices. As has been shown from the transpersonal theories discussed, this occurrence is not unusual. When spiritual forces are introduced into a weak psyche, the effects are potentially devastating. Nelson has delineated the different possibilities for this process and its outcomes; these range from an expedient integration of the spiritual forces and stabilizing of the personality on a higher plane to a disintegration of the ego into a state of malignant regression.

A task of this dissertation has been to address the plight of the significant minority of people who fall in between these two extremes. Their episodes of psychosis are in the service of transcendence, and if allowed to progress without interference, can be healing and transformative. These functional psychoses, or spiritual emergencies, can usually be distinguished from the organic psychoses, although the symptoms may appear identical. Nelson's criteria have been presented to aid the practitioner in diagnosis.

A discussion of the phenomenon known as kundalini awakening and its complex of symptoms has also been a main focus of this dissertation. In the four cases, all have recognized that their spiritual journeys involved some measure of kundalini activity. The apparent differences of how each person experienced and assimilated these potent forces were explained in light of other significant factors

such as the level of development and strength of the ego and the condition of the nervous system. An assessment of these factors was recognized as important for making decisions about diagnosis and intervention.

Although the Grofs have identified kundalini experiences as one type of spiritual emergency, questions arise in the minds of some about whether kundalini energy is the underlying principle responsible for all mystical religious experiences, all spiritual emergencies, and many forms of insanity. This link would explain the similarities found among them. The research on kundalini has not yet progressed to the point of being able to answer these questions beyond speculation. The phenomenon itself, however, has become more widely recognized among mental health professionals over the past ten years. A main purpose of this dissertation has been to introduce the topic to the field of pastoral care and counseling with the intention of consciousness raising.

A survey of the literature generated throughout this century reveals that the interest in the phenomena discussed in this dissertation is not new. Mystical conversions and psychological upheavals with religious themes were popular topics addressed during the early nineteenth hundreds and again in the sixties and seventies. The interest is expressed once more in this decade as is apparent through the growing body of literature on spiritual emergency. Three

questions prevail throughout the discussions: What causes these dramatic experiences?; Who are the likely candidates?; and, Are these experiences pathological?

The answers which the current literature offers in response to these questions echo the voices of the ones who pondered them long before now. For example, in 1936, Anton Boisen came to the conclusion that many of the serious psychoses which he observed in hospital patients were basically problem-solving experiences. He also recognized that these acute disturbances were closely related to the struggles endured by some people of religious genius. The Grofs' concept of spiritual emergency affirms the insights of Boisen that these inner battles during which one faces the great realities of life and death are attempts to reorganize the personality around the higher ideals represented by the sacred. Nelson identifies these same dynamics as regression in the service of transcendence.

The writings of William James on mysticism at the turn of the century speak of the realities of states of consciousness entirely different from the normal waking state. He believed that, given the right conditions, these forms of consciousness could be completely available and possibly useful to one. The Grofs' research on altered states of consciousness some sixty years later confirmed his insights. Stanislov Grof's extensive study of nonordinary states of consciousness and the discovery of the healing

potential which they hold laid groundwork for the development of the concept of spiritual emergency.

The new body of knowledge emerging from the transpersonal school on spiritual emergency and kundalini awakenings brings a larger perspective to the insights of the observations of people like James and Boisen. The lights, visions, voices, and changed lives of James' sudden converts can now be possibly explained as signs of awakened kundalini energy. The healing struggles through psychosis endured by Boisen's hospital patients can now be understood as regressions in the service of transcendence.

Finally, the emerging transpersonal paradigm offers a more expansive perspective for understanding transformational crises to the field of pastoral care and counseling. My hope is that the principles discussed in this dissertation will shed new light into the shadowy areas where mental illness and spirituality appear to overlap. My hope is that the pastoral counselor will draw from this wisdom and be enabled to hear and heal with new levels of awareness and compassion.

CHAPTER 7

Theological Reflections

The concept of kundalini energy as the life force of the universe has been an element of Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist thought for thousands of years. According to these teachings, kundalini energy is a real and present force that permeates the world and all sentient life, even when dormant. When kundalini energy is activated in the human organism, it becomes a strong spiritual force leading to intense religious experience and potentially empowering human development.

The rebirth process which has been identified as kundalini awakening appears to be universal; its clear and predictable patterns have been revealed in the lives of people undergoing transformation across all cultures and throughout all times.¹ A main focus of the dissertation has been on the transforming power of kundalini energy in the lives of four Christians. Traditionally, Christianity has understood the process of spiritual growth and enlightenment as the work of the Holy Spirit. The question therefore remains: How are kundalini energy and the Holy Spirit

¹The Hopi Indians, for example, recognize that because humanity has fallen from grace, each person must make the slow upward climb to restore the functions of the "higher centers" (the centers fit the descriptions of the chakras as found in Kundalini Yoga). "The door at the crown of the head then opens, and [one] merges into the wholeness of all Creation, whence [one] sprang." Frank Waters, Book of the Hopi (Penguin Books, 1977). Cited in Muktananda, 3.

related?

John White claims that kundalini energy is "akin, if not identical," not only to the Chinese ch'i, and the Japanese ki, but to the Holy Spirit, as well.² The Reverend Robert Stucky, who is well acquainted with both the Hindu and Christian traditions, supports this position. He has encouraged Christians to draw from the wisdom and resources of the eastern traditions "because they draw on the same water table of life that extends in all directions."³

Despite this likening of the kundalini to the Holy Spirit, however, for some Christians, their experience has been of two energies, not one. For example, during his kundalini awakening, Philip experienced kundalini energy as "of-me, but not-me," and "of-God, but not-God." Philip understood kundalini as both "trans-egoic" and as his own personal "psychic energy and libido."⁴ Because of his experiences, he has come to the conclusion that the energy of kundalini is not the same as the Holy Spirit (which is God), but may be, in fact, the energy of the Soul.⁵ The Soul is the unique creation and abode of God rooted in human

²White, 21.

³Robert Stucky, "In Christ There is no East or West," Ultra 1 [Berkeley Divinity School at Yale] (Fall 1987): 20. Stucky lived in an Indian ashram and studied under Muktananda for ten years before becoming an Episcopal priest.

⁴St. Romain, 99.

⁵Ibid.

physicality; it is the deep place within the human being where the spiritual, psychological, and physiological dimensions are united. Philip believes that the kundalini may be generated by the Soul with the purpose of "awakening the powers of the Soul in the body."⁶

A possible separation between the Holy Spirit and the kundalini energy is suggested by several observations. First, paranormal phenomena, such as the capacity of healing and psychic abilities, have been manifested by some individuals who do not purport to be Christians or have a sense of Christ-presence in their lives; these would seem, therefore, not to be imbued with the Holy Spirit, but with the kundalini, instead. Secondly, both Philip and Sister Helen were filled with the spirit long before the first signs of kundalini awakening. Indeed, Philip was active in the charismatic movement and experienced what he took to be manifestations of the Spirit's presence, such as speaking in tongues, for thirteen years before the beginnings of his attested kundalini experience. The large gap in time between Philip's becoming spirit-filled and his experiencing the transformative action of kundalini energy suggests that the two dynamic processes may be different.

That these two dynamic forces are perceived by Christian aspirants as playing separate roles in their journeys is supported by the case study material in this

⁶Ibid., 99-100.

dissertation as well as by commentaries on spiritual life from Christian literary sources. As Philip was undergoing kundalini awakening, he longed for assurance that God was present in the process. Sister Helen reported that during her journey, part of which involved the development of her spiritual gifts (such as healing and seeing auras), she "lost Jesus for awhile." As in the case study of Philip, she went through periods of darkness when she could not sense the presence of the Holy Spirit.

In the journeys of T and Mineda, the awakening of kundalini was accompanied by fear and disorientation as well as by the emergence of psychic phenomena. T and Mineda both understood and accepted their discomfort as part of their spiritual journeys, but attributed their emotional pain to something other than the Holy Spirit. Instead, they viewed their struggles as by-products of deep movements toward spiritual illumination, and, like the other two case study subjects, they sought the assuring presence of the Holy Spirit to guide them.

Of course, whether kundalini energy and the Holy Spirit are the same or different cannot be said with certainty. More research is needed to answer the many questions that remain. What is apparent is that the gifts of spiritual growth (prophesying, speaking in tongues, visions, trances, and other such paranormal phenomena) are shared by the eastern and Christian traditions, and in both traditions

their acquisition is viewed as evidence that the "spirit" is active, whatever that spirit is named.

In neither tradition, however, is the manifestation of gifts an ultimate goal. St. Paul emphasized this fact when he admonished Christians to focus not on the gifts (1 Cor. 12: 7-10), but on love, which is a fruit (1 Cor. 13; Gal. 5: 22-23). Paul taught that the gift of prophecy, for instance, has to be tempered by discernment and wisdom, which comes from knowing God's will, for the edification of the church (1 Cor. 12:10). Being in harmony with God's will, therefore, provides the believer with an ethical and moral framework through which to understand and channel the gifts. The Christian mystics, such as Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, reiterated this message: union with God is the goal, not the gifts.

Eastern religions also acknowledge the need for keeping spiritual gifts and ethics in balance. Although, as the Reverend Robert Stucky maintains, in Indian religion, the gifts are viewed as signs that the "spirit" is active, they are considered "part of the purgative process that leads to God."⁷ They are not viewed as evidence of holiness, nor are they alone capable of imparting discernment to the aspirant. Wisdom is, therefore, necessary for utilizing these gifts in order to live a holy life devoted to service.

The emphasis on both discernment and wisdom in both

⁷Stucky, 19.

traditions and the ability of gifts to occur in the absence of fruits provides a clue as to the possible functions of the kundalini and the Holy Spirit. As a Christian who has experienced transformation both as the work of the Holy Spirit and as the activity of the kundalini energy, I propose that these sources of spiritual power may play different, but complementary, roles in the process of transformation. It is possible that kundalini energy is the driving mechanism of spiritual experience while the Holy Spirit acts as a guiding force. Whereas these processes travel on two separate tracks, both are heading in the same direction: spiritual growth and development. Whereas kundalini energy functions to awaken spiritual gifts in the believer, the Holy Spirit serves to keep one in right relationship to God.

The countless examples of signs and wonders occurring within the context of God's saving grace in the Gospels illustrate the phenomenon of the kundalini energy and the Holy Spirit working as one. For instance, Jesus felt power go forth from him when a hemorrhaging woman touched his garment. Her healing was effected through her faith in God, mediated by the love and compassion of Jesus (Luke 8:43-48).

A few parallels with the Holy Spirit's connection to the deity exist in the Hindu literature, as was discussed in Chapter 3. For example, kundalini is the goddess Shakti who emanates from the god Shiva. Her awakening within a devotee

unleashes spiritual power that allows him/her to attain God-consciousness and realize his/her true potential. The literature on kundalini awakening does not, however, address issues of relationship to the divinity and the values that emerge as a result of that relationship to the extent that Christian writings have done.

Rather than emphasizing a direct relationship with the divinity, in eastern thought the focus is primarily on aligning oneself with a master, who instructs the aspirant and guides him/her on the spiritual path. In fact, one of the roles of the Guru in Indian religion is to impart his/her own shakti (spiritual power) to the disciple through the ritual of shaktipat.⁸

In a sense, the shaktipat is mirrored in Christianity, in the baptism of the Holy Spirit. In Christianity, Jesus fulfills the role of guru who transmits his own energy through the sacraments, and the Holy Spirit is the counterpart of the kundalini transmitted from master to disciple, except that the Holy Spirit is the kundalini of Christ.⁹

It is the Holy Spirit that grants to the faithful Christian the wisdom and discernment necessary for living a holy life, which, in eastern religions, must be learned from a guru, along with the tenets of a particular spiritual

⁸Muktananda, 6-7.

⁹St. Romain, 117-18.

path. The Holy Spirit, emanating from God the Creator, is given to the believer in the name of Jesus, the Redeemer. The Holy Spirit, then, is intimately connected with the person of Jesus, inspiring devotion to Jesus, and transforming the believer according to his will (John 14:25-26) .

What distinguishes eastern thought from Christian theology is the absence in the former of an I-thou relationship with God. In both Christian and eastern experience, it could be said that when kundalini energy arises within the individual, gifts begin to manifest themselves; but in order to attain the fruits, the devotee of an eastern religion must additionally access the guidance of a master, or, in the case of a Christian, the Holy Spirit, the guiding wisdom of Christ.

In either case, then, spiritual guidance (or a distinctive form of channeling) is needed as people journey through intense religious experience because the spiritual journey can be salugenetic or pathogenic, ethical or unethical. The form that this guidance takes will depend on the unique religious and cultural contexts. Within a Christian context, some of the guiding visions might be toward fullness of life, or toward well-being for the individual and for other people and God's creation.

The Holy Spirit is present in kundalini energy and beyond it; the Holy Spirit can guide people through intense

religious experience, both as a presence within the experience and as a guide beyond.

At the same time, the importance of the kundalini energy should not be underestimated or dismissed. Philip likens this power to a "highly charged elixir" that, when poured into a vessel with cracks or weak spots, can leak away, but, if poured into a strong vessel, can serve as a "mighty force on earth." Care should therefore be taken to fortify the earthen vessel, and to discipline the senses, as it is they through which the kundalini energy flows.¹⁰

For the pastoral counselor, the kundalini energy and the chakras present a way of understanding the integration of body, mind, and spirit. As has been demonstrated in the dissertation, the kundalini/chakra model offers alternative ways of viewing the acquisition of spiritual gifts, the development of higher states of consciousness, and the relationship of spirituality to some forms of mental illness. It is my hope that pastoral caregivers be open as they consider these new concepts and prayerfully seek wisdom as they incorporate them into their work.

¹⁰Ibid., 101.

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